

# *Interzone*

NEW STORIES BY

**ANGELA CARTER**

**KEITH ROBERTS**

**M. JOHN HARRISON**

**JOHN SLADEK**

**MICHAEL MOORCOCK**



# Interzone

## EDITORIAL

**F**or ten years or more, there has been a gap in British magazine publishing. We have lacked a popular magazine devoted to intelligent science fiction and fantasy – and to the other types of imaginative prose which lie on the borders of those genres. *Interzone* is a new attempt to close that gap, and to bring before a fairly wide but discerning readership the best fantastic fiction we can find. This first issue contains original contributions from Angela Carter, M. John Harrison, Michael Moorcock, Keith Roberts and John Sladek – all writers with established reputations. Our second issue will also feature several well-established names. But in addition we intend to run stories by new writers. We believe that the nurturing of new authors is one of the principal reasons for the necessity of this magazine. Established writers – by definition – have established markets; publishers are willing to invest in their works; they have proved themselves. And in most cases the established imaginative writers of today first proved themselves in magazines – in publications such as *Science Fantasy* and *New Worlds* which no longer exist. We wish to enlarge the opportunities for the emergence of new writers; we want to prepare the ground for major talents to come. *Interzone* hopes to develop within the tradition of the best British magazines of the past, but that's not to say it will be a close copy of the bygone magazines: this is emphatically a new magazine for a new decade.

*Interzone* is produced by an unpaid collective of eight people. All profits will be reinvested in the magazine and will help to pay the authors decent rates for their work. As editors/publishers we are motivated by a belief in the value of imaginative fiction. However estranged it may seem on the surface, the best sf and fantasy portrays a real world: the increasingly complex, tragicomic and mystifying world of the late 20th century. We believe that a fantastic mode of writing is best suited to deal with that world. Beyond this, we have few editorial preconceptions and are willing to let the magazine develop in whichever directions the best writers choose for themselves. It will not be purely an sf magazine, or a fantasy magazine, but we intend that it will always be a magazine of imagination and of quality. We will be searching for the most entertaining and original material we can find, a fiction for the 1980s which will continue to be readable in the decades beyond.

We hope you are stimulated by the contents of this issues, but that you don't judge us on the first issue alone – for *Interzone* will be a growing organism; each future issue will bear new buds. Stay with us, tell your friends and acquaintances of our existence, and send us your comments. (We intend that the magazine should increase in size and frequency, and have room to publish readers' letters as well as readers' stories.)

David Pringle

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Edited and produced collectively by John Clute, Alan Dorey, Malcolm Edwards, Colin Greenland, Graham Jones, Roz Kaveney, Simon Ounsley and David Pringle. Designed by Philippa Bramson. All material is © *Interzone*, 1982. Editorial addresses: 28 Duckett Road, London N4 1BN or 21 The Village Street, Leeds LS4 2PR.

*Interzone* is published quarterly, in March, June, September and December. Unsolicited contributions are welcomed, but must be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope, or they cannot be returned. No responsibility can be accepted for loss or damage to unsolicited material, howsoever caused.

Subscriptions are £5.00 for one year (four issues). All cheques, postal orders, etc should be crossed and made payable to *Interzone*. Subscriptions in the USA and Canada are \$10.00 for one year from *Interzone*, 9 Patchin Place, New York, NY 10011.

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Special thanks to all who attended Yorcon II, the 32nd British SF Convention, held in Leeds in 1981. The surplus money from that convention has helped fund *Interzone*. Thanks also to the many readers who have shown their faith by taking out charter subscriptions.

Typeset by Bryan Williamson and printed by Tony Ward at the Arc & Throstle Press Ltd, Todmorden, Lancs.

# THE NEW RAYS

## M. JOHN HARRISON

When I first arrived here it was after a hideous journey. We were ten hours on the train, which stopped and started constantly at provincial stations and empty sidings. It was packed with young conscripted soldiers shouting and singing or else staring desperately out of the windows as if they wished they had the courage to jump. We got one cup of coffee at a halt in the Midlands. In the confusion of getting back into our seats I took out the little gilt travelling clock which W.B. had given me the first time I was ill, and somehow lost it. A young boy pushing his way down the carriage helped us look for it. For a moment he seemed to forget where he was; then he looked round suddenly and lurched off. I was inconsolable. Two nights in succession I had dreamed the name of a street, Agar Grove.

We arrived late in the afternoon, just in time to watch the city dissolve into black rain, water and darkness. During the night I woke up and had to go down the corridor to the lavatory. The hotel was cold and squalid at that hour. There was a gas leak. When I looked out of a window some men were digging up the street. It was still raining.

The next morning I had my preliminary visit to Dr Alexandre in Camden Town. I was reluctant to leave the hotel, and delayed by pretending I had lost my money along with the clock. "Perhaps the young soldier stole it. Anyway we can't afford the taxi fare." Then I went to the wrong address and banged on the door until W.B. lost his temper and we had one of our typical quarrels in the road. I told him that the journey had confused me; but really I was frightened that Dr Alexandre would prove unsympathetic. In the end he drove off in the taxi, shouting, "I wash my hands of you. It was you who wanted to come here." I went immediately to the right house and stood on the doorstep, not wanting to go in. After I rang the bell I could hear scampering and laughter inside, followed by a faint drumming sound as if a machine had been switched on and off.

Dr Alexandre had a beautiful crippled girl who answered the door and acted as interpreter. Through her he told me that he could effect a complete cure. I

didn't believe that for a moment. Everything seemed suddenly useless and shabby – although the clinic itself, with its odd maroon decor and chromium lamps, seemed nice.

To get rid of this depression I had a cup of coffee at the corner, then went to a picture gallery for the rest of the morning. In one or two small rooms at the back they had an exhibition of new artists. I was particularly struck by a picture of a woman of my own age. The background was a buff-coloured wall with two trees in front of it, completely flat trees which looked as if they had been pasted on to the wall. Behind this, from a ledge or balcony, two more flat trees emerged. They were all lifeless and stunted. In front of them a youngish woman was sitting listlessly, her sullen unfocused stare the same colour as the wall, her throat swollen with goitre. Everything was flat except her throat, which had a massive, sculptural quality.

When I got back to the hotel W.B. had gone, leaving a note which said, "I know you are frightened but you have to have some thought for other people. Write to me when you have settled in."

I can describe Dr Alexandre quite easily. I have the feeling that he can help people but also the feeling that he is an unscrupulous impostor. He is the kind of man who wears a dark suit. His eyes are blue and demanding, quite unintelligent in the wrong light. He is frightened that soon he will be repatriated or interned. He has a soothing voice but one which, you sense, could easily say: "I cannot have you here disturbing the other patients if you do not give me your full cooperation. We are in this together. You must co-operate with me fully and then we will make good progress together against your disease." When the lame girl translates for him she unconsciously mimics his fussy gestures.

The new rays are intermittent and difficult to focus. When they come they are sometimes the stealthy gold or russet colour of a large, reassuring animal; sometimes a wash of rose like a water-colour sunset. (I warm to these particular rays and, despite the knowledge of the pain to follow, allow

them to comfort me. I feel no time pass, I feel no physical sensation at all; I am laved, washed quite clean, and experience nothing.) But most of the time they are a blue-black colour which fills the bare treatment shed with shadows and imparts to the teeth and spectacles of Dr Alexandre and his assistant a kind of jetty gloss. They come with a desultory buzzing which you feel in the bones of your jaw; or a drumming noise which rises and falls, the sound of heels drumming briefly on an iron pipe, sometimes near, sometimes unbearably far away. It is the sound of loss, and the giving up of all dignity. Dr Alexandre and his assistant put on their goggles and nod at one another.

It appears now that they are not even sure where the new rays are from. The discovery was accidental, and took place many years ago in some laboratory where it was ignored. Since he does not yet fully understand the nature of the rays, it's entirely possible that Dr Alexandre will kill me sooner than my disease. Standing there in my dressing gown, feeling sore and violated by the laxatives which are an important part of the treatment, I couldn't help but laugh out loud at this idea; but when I tried to explain, the lame girl thought I was making a complaint and refused to translate. I was embarrassed.

At the hotel I sat in the bathroom trying to write a letter. Two cockroaches crawled from under the carpet and crawled back again. "Dear W.B., When I try to imagine you at home in our lovely house all I can remember is one yellow chair and the smell of Vinolia Soap."

**O**n treatment mornings I get up early and walk through the rainy streets by the river, or travel aimlessly here and there on the Underground, so I have some part of the day to remember unspoiled. We aren't supposed to eat and drink for five hours before a treatment, but all my good intentions go by the board in warm damp cafes at Baker Street or Mornington Crescent. At that time of the morning no-one speaks to you. All you have for company is the image of yourself in the steamy mirrors behind the counter, a woman younger than middle-aged, in a good coat, drinking another cup of coffee to stop herself fainting on the train.

Off a corridor at the back of the clinic there are two or three pleasant little waiting rooms. They are very modern and aseptic, with contract furniture, aluminium window frames, and a bed over which is stretched a white plastic sheet; but the walls are a cheerful yellow and you can switch on a little radio. You undress here. After a few minutes Dr Alexandre's assistant comes in and gives you a kind of bluish milk to drink, explaining that it will clear out your insides and at the same time coat them with a paste which will attract the rays. He goes out of the room and you begin to feel dizzy and nauseous almost immediately. Soon you have to choose between the sink or the little lavatory with its yellow paper on a roll. You can't lock the door in case you faint. By the time he comes back with the wheelchair you are too tired to stand. He will put your clothes away and help you comb your hair and then wheel you out to the treatment shed.

The shed has a sour concrete floor sloping to a drain in the middle. It is cold and, unlike the waiting rooms, retains the smell of vomit, rubber, and jeyes fluid. It occupies a muddy open space thirty yards behind the

main building. This is for reasons of safety, claims Dr Alexandre. I suspect he is afraid of accidentally curing passers-by, but you cannot risk a joke like this with the crippled girl. "The doctor is so sorry for the present inconvenience to patients," she translates earnestly. "He hopes they will not complain." And she gives me a savage stare. In fact I quite like the shabby bit of garden which is the last thing you see before you go into the shed. A few lupins, gone desperately to seed, add something human to the clutter of duckboards thrown down hastily to prevent the wheelchairs and builders' barrows from bogging down in the mud. There is often a fire burning here, as if a gardener or workman were about, but you never see him.

In the black and chaotic moment when the rays arrive, Dr Alexandre and his assistant struggle into their loose yellowish rubber suits and round tinted goggles. Once they are covered from head to foot like this all their kindness seems to be replaced by panic. They grab you roughly: there is no turning back: up on the table you go, trembling as you help them fasten the straps. Before you can open your mouth they force into it the vile rubber wedge which stops you biting your tongue. The focusing machine has already begun to buzz and rattle faintly as it picks up the initial burst of rays. Soon the whole hut is vibrating. Dr Alexandre stares at his watch: he wasn't ready for this: there's real panic behind those round blue lenses now. Hurry up, he urges you with gestures. Hurry up! You bruise your feet pushing them into the stirrups. A thick vibration like the taste of liquorice creeps into your lungs and along your spine. The buzzing has invaded you. Black light splashes across the room. Here it comes, here it comes...

If you are getting your treatment free of charge, you have to agree to have it without an anaesthetic. You mustn't pass out.

Through the most abysmal vomits and discharges, when the rays seem to be laying down a thick coat of poison in every organ, you can still hear the urgent, earnest voice of the crippled girl. "Are you conscious? Can you raise your head? Are you aware that you have lost control of your bowels? We must know." Into your field of vision, blackness spraying off his smooth goggled rubber head, bobs Dr Alexandre's assistant, anxious that nothing should escape the record. And into the exhausted calm after the blue-black shower has abated and all three of them have taken off their goggles, the uncertain foreign tones of Dr Alexandre fall, and you must be awake to answer his questions.

**S**ometimes the rays don't arrive at all. What bliss to be let off with a cup of tea in the reception room and told to go home again!

**A** fortnight after I got here it turned foggy, first a black fog, then a yellow one which filled the streets like gas; but I didn't miss a treatment. One of the blue bodies got out and drifted about in the garden for a while before it was caught. There was such an expression of puzzlement on its face: as if it knew it had been in the garden before but could not remember when. After a while a man came out and pushed it back into the treatment shed, grumbling and flapping his arms.

The same day I fell asleep on the train on the way

back to the hotel, and dreamed I was disembarking from a ship. When I went up on deck with my case and umbrella, a cold wind came off the land and blew my hair into my eyes. It was just before dawn, and the funnels of the ship were dark against a greenish sky like heavily-worked oil paint. Down on the shadowy quay muffled figures waited for the passengers. Everybody except me knew where to go and what to do. I shuffled forward, trying to pretend that I knew too. The sun rose while the queue was still slowly leaving the ship. The land never seemed to get any brighter. When I woke up somebody had stolen my red gloves, which had been on the seat beside me.

W.B.'s letters, full of solicitude and domestic calm and the dark woods lighted so mysteriously by the white boughs of the ash trees when I take my evening walk', drove me out into the fog, to the picture galleries and cafes. I couldn't stay in the hotel on my own; they look at you so accusingly if you are ill and on your own. In a cafe nobody notices you at all. You can eat your piece of sponge cake, read your letter, and leave. "Seventy pence please." "Fifty two pence please." And you go out with the simple vision of a human face turning away forever, into streets which seem to be populated with wounded soldiers – big, lost-looking boys whose surprised eyes stare past you at something which isn't there.

"I'm feeling so much better," I wrote untruthfully to W.B. The rays seemed to have settled in my bones like a deposit of poisonous metal, and I could hardly get out of bed the day after a treatment. "And I get on well with the other women."

Actually we have no time for one another. Despite our diversity we are all very much alike – a desperate, frightened bunch, concentrating on the only important business we have left, which is survival. We exchange nods as we are hurried along the corridors by wheelchair, too self-involved to speak. In the common room – where without turning your head you can see a countess with 'anaemia of the brain', the mistress of a discredited novelist, and three young prostitutes seeking a cure for some new venereal complaint – we sit like stones. Many of the others have been here for a year or more. If we have a social hierarchy, these old hands are the cream of it. They have their heads shaved once a month so that their hair doesn't soak up the smell of the treatment shed. They 'live in' and look down on the out-patients, whom they call 'weekend invalids'. Through their stiff cropped stubble, which gives them as surprised a look as the wounded boys in the streets, I perceive the bony vulnerable plates of their skulls.

When the blue bodies get loose they sometimes wander into the clinic itself, as if looking for something. One evening when the fog was at its height, Dr Alexandre's assistant took us downstairs to see one. They were keeping it in a small room with white lavatory-tiled walls. It was supposed to have been left on a bench, but when we arrived it had somehow fallen off and got itself into a corner among some old metal cylinders and stretcher-poles. Its face was pressed into them as if it had been trying to escape the light of the unshaded overhead bulb. Dr Alexandre's assistant ran his hand through his hair and laughed. What could he do, he seemed to be asking, with something so stupid? He pulled it back

on to the table where it lay blindly like a mannequin made of transparent blue jelly.

"Come and touch it," he encouraged us. "There's nothing to be frightened of. As you can see it has no internal organs." It was quite cold and inert. When you touched it there was a slight tautness, a resistance to your fingertip similar to the resistance you would get from a plastic bag full of water; and a dent was left which remained for two or three minutes. When one of the women began to cry and left the room, Dr Alexandre's assistant said, "They have no internal organs. They are not alive in any way medical science can define."

Before he could move away I asked him, "What becomes of the poor things after we have finished with them?"

I lay in bed for three days at the hotel, very ill and depressed, wondering if it was all worth it. To W.B. I wrote, "Why this mania of mine to stay alive? I feel no better. I can't even go for a walk or eat a piece of cake! I hate myself for hanging on." When I caught sight of myself in the mirror I was so thin that my shoulder blades looked like two plucked chicken wings. Sleeping fitfully during the day, I dreamed that I had a goitre which drained all the virtues of the world around me. Everything around me grew two-dimensional and unrealistic, while the thing on my neck fattened up like a huge purple plum. I woke up in a sweat and found myself staring out of the window at a square of sky the colour of zinc.

Later I found that someone had telephoned me, but the hotel people hadn't thought to wake me up. They said they had made a mistake about my name.

At night I could hardly sleep at all. I stared out of the window; listened to the boys singing under the sodium lamps in their mournful, half-broken voices. Far away a man blew inexpertly on a bugle. One boy lifted up the stump of his arm, which looked as if it was covered with black tar. I thought that if W.B. would let me change my mind and start paying for the treatments I might feel less downcast.

The mornings are dark now, and quite cold. You cannot see inside the cafes for steam; it billows over the pavement where people are buttoning themselves into their overcoats. As Winter approaches, and the women wheel their prams a little quicker along the streets by the river, a thin wind rises round Dr Alexandre's clinic. Some little-understood property of the new rays, it seems, is rotting the walls of the treatment shed, so that when you get down on the table now you are surrounded at once by little icy draughts smelling of decayed wood. The wallclock, a very delicate mechanism, stopped and had to be replaced. When they opened it up all its working parts were covered with damp furry mould.

Outside Dr Alexandre's office window a couple of low shrubs struggle with the desolation of the treatment shed garden, their greyish leaves and waxy orange berries covered with a film of dust or thin mud according to the weather. Inside, the doctor sits impatiently behind a desk piled high with papers, manilla envelopes, rubber tubes. Behind him are some green metal shelves, so overloaded with the patients' files that they curve in the middle. It was raining the afternoon I was there. A desk lamp was burning in the dim room and the crippled girl was staring out across the



garden through the streaming window pane. "The doctor wishes to say something to you," she told me, turning reluctantly to face into the room. "He asks me to say that you must not worry the other patients with questions. It will only hold up your own progress, as well as interfering with theirs. A positive attitude is very important."

I cleared my throat. "I can see that," I said cautiously.

The doctor wrote something on the margin of the file in front of him. Suddenly he held up his hand for silence, stared hard at me, and said with great difficulty and slowness: "Matter is cheap in the universe. It is disorganised, but yearns to be of use. Do you see? We do nothing wrong when we create these blue bodies. We violate no laws." He put the cap carefully on his pen then leaned back in his chair and remained silent for some minutes, as if the effort of speaking English had tired him out. The crippled girl watched me triumphantly from the window.

"I only want to be sure I'm doing the right thing," I explained. "It's that I don't quite understand what happens to them when they're finished with."

"Do we not give you these treatments free?" Dr Alexandre reminded me gently.

After this he made the girl translate for him again while he examined me. "The doctor says you are not making fast progress. You are not sleeping. Why is this? He thinks you should move into the clinic if you wish your treatments to have the best effect. Your disease does not wait. Please do not talk to the other women in the common room. Everything here is humane and legal."

**A**ll I want from life is this room. If I can successfully identify myself with its red candlewick bedspread, the mustard wallpaper and the thin light coming in through the curtains, I won't have to admit to anything else.

I decided not to move into the clinic. But I couldn't stand the hotel any longer. When I went to the lavatory in the small hours there was always someone there to stare at my hair or clothes; if I found the courage to complain at the desk about the silverfish in the bathroom, the woman said it wasn't very convenient for them to have me always asleep in the room during the day. Then W.B. arrived, and there was a fuss about transferring us to a double room. They weren't going to let us have one at all until I said I would be moving out soon.

At night we lay in bed talking. Suddenly he asked me, "What are you thinking?" and I had to answer, "That I had died and one of our friends had gone to tell you."

I thought that if I could get furnished accommodation somewhere I would feel better. In furnished accommodation you can sleep all day, come and go as you like. But in Bayswater in November it was difficult. They were all too expensive or they didn't want single women. At first I didn't mind. I treated it as a holiday. A tremendous lonely wind blew us up and down the streets, past the cats, milk bottles, and pots of geraniums in basement areas. I felt elated, as if we had recovered something of our youth. Then came a week of really difficult treatments; the rays were more intractable than ever; I was very tired. We started to argue about Dr Alexandre. W.B. was all for him now. "After all it was your decision to come here." Soon we

were having a blazing row in the hotel lobby. The woman behind the desk watched exactly as if she was at the cinema, nodding slyly to the other guests when they came down to see what was happening.

"You disgust me, stewing in your self-concern!" shouted W.B. I ran out into the street for some air and fell over.

After that I walked around for a while not quite knowing where I was, until I got the idea of going into a gallery and sitting down in front of the first picture I came to.

It showed a woman standing by a yellowish shoreline covered with boulders. The sea was slack and cold. In the background, where the bay curved round into a promontory, some wooden frame houses, and a grey sky streaked with more yellow, were one or two indistinct figures – a man, another woman, perhaps a child in a white confirmation dress – with their backs turned. It had a sort of exhausted calm. I heard myself say quietly: "There is something detestable about all these attempts to preserve yourself." Once I had understood this a complete tranquillity came over me, and I realised I hadn't felt so well for a long time. I laughed softly. I was hungry. Soon I would get up and run all the way back to the hotel, but first I would have a cup of coffee and perhaps some battenburg cake.

A man in a lovely grey suit came and stood next to me. "It has a certain atmosphere, this one, doesn't it?" he said. He sighed. "A certain atmosphere." He had come to tell me the gallery was closing; I saw that it was almost dark outside and suddenly remembered W.B.

When I got up to go I felt odd and a bit tired. The attendant put out his hand to help me and I was horrified to see vomit pour unexpectedly and painlessly out of my mouth all over the sleeve of his suit. I stood trembling with cold, surrounded by the sour smell of it, until they got the name of the hotel from me and put me in a taxi. "At least I didn't do it on the picture," I thought on the way back. "At least it was only his sleeve." In the hotel lobby I found all my cases piled by the door. The woman behind the desk wouldn't let me go up to my room.

"Your friend left some time ago I'm afraid," she said. I stared at her. "If you recall my dear, you did tell us you'd be moving into furnished accommodation when your friend left."

In the end they agreed to let me have the room for one more week.

**I** was ill all the next day. I stayed in the room trying to eat soup but I couldn't keep anything down, not even water, and if I closed my eyes and concentrated I could hear a far-away buzzing, like a noise at the end of a corridor. I wrote letters to W.B. ("Please forgive me and take me away from here") and tore them up. When the maid came in there was a row about the state of the sheets, but they can't get rid of me now until the end of the week. I made them change the bed. In the end I was so frightened I decided to go and see Dr Alexandre and find out why I was this ill.

It was quite late when I arrived at the clinic. A strange woman came out of the common room wiping her mouth on a paper serviette, and walked off down the passage without speaking. There was the distant sound of a tray being dropped in the kitchens. I had the impression that things were going on here much as

they did during the day, but at a reduced and much duller pace. I went to the rooms I knew, one after the other, hoping I would remember how to find Dr Alexandre's office. The waiting rooms were unlocked: I sat in one of them for a bit, touching the familiar plastic bedsheet with my hand and turning the hot water on and off in the little sink. Later I stood in the dark in the garden in case I could see the office from there. But a bluish light came from under the treatment shed door, so I went back in.

By now I couldn't remember where anything was. I went downstairs and tried a door with frosted glass panels, but it was only an empty linen cupboard. While I was in there I heard someone coming. One of the blue bodies had got into the passage and was drifting towards me, pale and bemused-seeming under the downstairs lights. It kept looking back over its shoulder, blundering into doorways, and entangling its limbs in the heating pipes which ran along the walls. The crippled girl came round a corner and began to urge it along impatiently.

I stared at her in surprise. I said, "I didn't know you were having treatment."

"You aren't allowed down here," she said. "Go back upstairs before someone finds you."

The blue body bobbed gently between us, waving its hands about in the air like a policeman directing the traffic. It touched her face; examined its own fingertips. It was the exact image of her, moulded in cool blue jelly. She pushed it away.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I can't seem to find the doctor. Perhaps you could help me. I feel rather ill."

She looked at me like a stone. "Patients aren't allowed downstairs after nine o'clock," she said. She drove the blue body out of the linen cupboard, where it had been trying to thrust its head in among the pillow slips, and started to manhandle it through a door further along the corridor. I followed her and stood outside watching. She had to struggle with it physically to keep it moving. Her hair fell into her eyes. Once she got it into the room, which was similar to the one in which Dr Alexandre's assistant had shown us our first blue body, she dragged it on to a table and lay down next to it. It stared inertly at the ceiling for a time, then slowly turned to face her. One of its legs slipped off the table. She put her arms round it and tried to get it to press itself against her, encouraging it with little clicks of her tongue.

When nothing happened she got off the table with an irritable sigh, went to the door, and looked up and down the corridor. No-one was there. Then she got back on to the table again. This time something seemed to happen but before I could see what it was the blue body fell off the table, pulling her down with it. She began to shout and scream with pain. I went closer and saw that they were partly joined together along their legs. The blue body had penetrated the muscles of her calves. She was flailing about, calling, "Push us together! Help!" The blue body stared at the ceiling, opening and closing its mouth.

"What are you doing?" I said.

"For God's sake!" cried the crippled girl. "Help us join back together!"

I backed away and ran upstairs to the common room and sat down. Later that night there was a lot of coming and going, and I heard Dr Alexandre and his assistant shouting in the passages.

When I first came here it was like a picture painted on a sodden, opened-out cardboard box. I remember the train slowing down between garden fences from which dangled bits of rag; and convolvulus spilling like white of egg out of a rusty old car abandoned in a scrapyard. Some of the soldiers said goodbye to us; most of them went silently away up the platform. All I want now is to stay in this room sleeping and reading. The maid says very politely, "Could you go downstairs for a bit miss, we want to give the place a thorough going over." They know they will be getting rid of me tomorrow. W.B. will come and fetch me. We are going over to France, where he has heard of a man who has had above-average success with a new chemical.

Last night, listening to the barges full of conscripts being towed up and down the river, the men singing their mournful songs, I thought: "Places are not so easy to escape from." I will never go back to Agar Grove, but I see the blue bodies everywhere. Spawned in the violence and helplessness of the treatment shed, shadows of myself cast somehow by rays that no-one properly understands, they bob and gesticulate dumbly at the edge of vision. How many times have I said, "I would do anything at all to be cured!"?

Now that I have done everything I feel as if I have been complicit in some appalling violation of myself.

**M. John Harrison** had his first story published in *Science Fantasy* in 1966. Since then he has built up a reputation as one of our most sensitive and stylish writers. His novels include *The Committed Men* (1971), *The Centauri Device* (1974) and the well-received "Viriconium" trilogy – *The Pastel City* (1971), *A Storm of Wings* (1980) and a concluding volume to appear shortly.

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# KITEMASTER

## KEITH ROBERTS

**T**he ground crew had all but finished their litany. They stood in line, heads bowed, silhouetted against the last dull flaring from the west; below me the launch vehicle seethed gently to itself, water sizzling round a rusted boiler rivet. A gust of warmth blew up toward the gantry, bringing scents of steam and oil to mingle with the ever-present smell of dope. At my side the Kitecaptain snorted, it seemed impatiently; shuffled his feet, sank his bull head even further between his shoulders.

I glanced round the darkening hangar, taking in the remembered scene; the spools of cable, head-high on their trolleys, bright blades of the anchor rigs, fathom on fathom of the complex lifting train. In the centre of the place, above the wickerwork Observer's basket, the mellow light of oil lamps grew to stealthy prominence; it showed the spidery crisscrossings of girders, the faces of the windspeed telltales, each hanging from its jumble of struts. The black needles vibrated, edging erratically up and down the scales; beyond, scarcely visible in the gloom, was the complex bulk of the manlifter itself, its dark, spread wings jutting to either side.

The young priest turned a page of his book, half glanced toward the gantry. He wore the full purple of a Base Chaplain; but his worried face looked very young. I guessed him to be not long from his novitiate; the presence of a Kitemaster was a heavy weight to bear. His voice reached up to me, a thread of sound mixed with the blustering of the wind outside. "Therefore we beseech Thee, Lord, to add Thy vigilance to ours throughout the coming night; that the Land may be preserved, according to Thy covenant..." The final response was muttered; and he stepped back, closing the breviary with evident relief.

I descended the metal-latticed steps to the hangar floor, paced unhurriedly to the wicker basket. As yet there was no sign of Canwen, the Observer; but that was to be expected. A flyer of his seniority knows, as the Church herself knows, the value of the proper form of things. He would present himself upon his cue; but not before. I sprinkled oil and earth as the ritual dictates, murmured my blessing, clamped the Great Seal of the Church Variant to the basket rim and stepped away. I said, "Let the Watching begin."

At once the hangar became a scene of ordered confusion. Tungsten arcs came to buzzing life, casting their harsher and less sympathetic glare; orders were shouted, and Cadets ran to the high end doors, began to roll them back. The wind roared in at once, causing the canvas sides of the structure to boom and crack; the arc globes swung, sending shadows leaping on the curving walls. The valve gear of the truck set up

its fussing; I climbed back to the gantry as the heavy vehicle nosed into the open air. I restored the sacred vessels to their valise, clicked the lock and straightened.

The Kitecaptain glanced at me sidelong, and back to the telltales. "Windspeed's too high, by eight or ten knots," he growled. "And mark that gusting. It's no night for flying."

I inclined my head. "The Observer will decide," I said.

He snorted. "Canwen will fly," he said. "Canwen will always fly..." He turned on his heel. "Come into the office," he said. "You'll observe as well from there. In any case, there's little to see as yet." I took a last glance through the line of rain-spattered windows, and followed him.

**T**he room in which I found myself was small, and as spartan as the rest of the establishment. An oil lamp burned in a niche; a shelf held manuals and dogeared textbooks, another was piled with bulky box files. A wall radiator provided the semblance at least of comfort; there was a square steel strongbox, beside it a battered metal desk. On it stood a silver-mounted photograph; a line of youths stood stiffly before a massive, old-pattern launch vehicle.

The Captain glanced at it and laughed, without particular humour. "Graduation day," he said. "I don't know why I keep it. All the rest have been dead and gone for years. I'm the last; but I was the lucky one of course." He limped to a corner cabinet, opened it and took down glasses and a bottle. He poured, looked over his shoulder. He said, "It's been a long time, Helman."

I considered. Kitecaptains, by tradition, are a strangely-tempered breed of men. Spending the best part of their lives on the frontier as they do, they come to have scant regard for the social niceties most of us would take for granted; yet the safety of the Realm depends on their vigilance, and that they know full well. It gives them, if not a real, at least a moral superiority; and he seemed determined to use, or abuse, his position to the hilt. However if he chose to ignore our relative status, there was little I could do. In public, I might rebuke him; in private, I would merely risk a further loss of face. I accordingly remained impassive, and took the glass he proffered. "Yes," I agreed calmly. "It has, as you say, been a very long time."

He was still watching me narrowly. "Well at least," he said, "one of us did all right for himself. I've little enough to show for twenty years' service; save one leg two inches shorter than the other." He nodded at my robes. "They reckon," he said, "you'll be in line for the Grand Mastership one day. Oh yes, we hear the chat;



even stuck out in a rotting hole like this."

"All things," I said, "are within the will of God." I sipped cautiously. Outback liquor has never been renowned for subtlety, and this was no exception; raw spirit as near as I could judge, probably brewed in one of the tumbledown villages through which I had lately passed.

He gave his short, barking laugh once more. "Plus a little help from Variant politics," he said. "But you always had a smooth tongue when it suited. And knew how to make the proper friends."

"We are not all Called," I said sharply. There are limits in all things; and he was pushing me perilously close to mine. It came to me that he was already more than a little drunk. I walked forward to the window, peered; but nothing was visible. The glass gave me back an image of a bright Cap of Maintenance, the great clasp at my throat, my own sombre and pre-occupied face.

I sensed him shrug. "We aren't all touched in the head," he said bitterly. "You won't believe it, I find it hard myself; but I once had a chance at the Scarlet as well. And I turned it down. Do you know, there was actually a time when I believed in all of this?" He paused. "What I'd give, for my life back just once more," he said. "I wouldn't make the same mistakes again. A palace on the Middlemarch, that's what I'd have; servants around me, and decent wine to drink. Not the rotgut we get here. . ."

I frowned. Rough though his manner was, he had a way with him that tugged at memory; laughter and scents of other years, touches of hands. We all have our sacrifices to make; it's the Lord's way to demand them. There was a summer palace certainly, with flowering trees around it in the spring; but it was a palace that was empty.

I turned back. "What do you mean?" I said. "Believed in all of what?"

He waved a hand. "The Corps," he said. "The sort of crap you teach. I thought the Kingdom really needed us. It seems crazy now. Even to me." He drained the glass at a swallow, and refilled it. "You're not drinking," he said.

I set my cup aside. "I think," I said, "I'd best watch from the outer gallery."

"No need," he said. "No need, I'll shade the lamp." He swung down before the light a species of hessian screen; then arcs flared on the apron down below, and all was once more clear as day. Anchors, I saw, had been run out in a half circle from the rear of the launch vehicle. "We've never needed them yet," said the Kitecaptain at my elbow, "but on a night like this, who can tell?"

A ball of bright fire sailed into the air, arced swiftly to the east. At the signal cadets surged forward, bearing the first of the kites shoulder-high. They flung it from them; and the line tightened and strummed. The thing hung trembling, a few feet above their heads; then insensibly began to rise. Steerable arc lamps followed it; within seconds it was lost in the scudding overcast. The shafts of light showed nothing but sparkling drifts of rain.

"The pilot," said the Captain curtly; then glanced sidelong once more. "But I needn't tell a Kitemaster a thing like that," he said.

I clasped my hands behind me. I said, "Refresh my memory."

He considered for a while; then it seemed he came to a decision. "Flying a Cody rig isn't an easy business," he snapped. "Those bloody fools back home think it's like an afternoon in Middle Park." He rubbed his face, the iron-grey stubble of beard. "The pilot takes up five hundred foot of line," he said. "Less, if we can find stable air. The lifter kites come next. Three on a good day, four; though at a need we can mount more. The lifters' job is to carry the main cable; the cables' job is to steady the lifters. It's all to do with balance. Everything's to do with balance." He glanced sidelong once more; but if he expected a comment on his truism, he was disappointed.

Steam jetted from the launch vehicle, to be instantly whirled away. The Ground Controller squatted atop the big, hunched shape, one hand to the straining thread of cable, the other gesturing swiftly to the winchman; paying out, drawing in, as the pilot clawed for altitude. Others of the team stood ready to clamp the bronze cones to the main trace. The cone diameters decrease progressively, allowing the lifters to ride each to its proper station; and therein lies the skill. All must be judged beforehand; there is no room for error, no time for second thoughts.

An extra-heavy buffet shook the hangar's sides, set the Kitecaptain once more to scowling. Mixed with the hollow boom I thought I heard a growl of thunder. The main trace paid out steadily though, checked for the addition of the first of the vital cones. A second followed, and a third; and the Kitecaptain unconsciously gripped my arm. "They're bringing the lifters," he said, and pointed.

How they controlled the monstrous, flapping things at all was a mystery to me; but control them they did, hauling at the boxlike structures that seemed at any moment about to fling the men themselves into the air. The tail ring of the first was clipped about the line; orders echoed across the field, the kite sailed up smoothly into the murk. Its sisters followed it without a hitch; and the Captain visibly relaxed. "Good," he said. "That was neatly done. You'll find no better team this side of the Salient." He poured more spirit from the bottle, swallowed. "Arms and legs enough have been broken at that game," he said. "Aye, and necks; in gentler blows than this."

I restrained a smile. Despite his sourness, the quality of the man showed clear in the remark; the pride he still felt, justifiably, in a job well done. The rigs might look well enough in high summer, the lines of them floating lazy against the blue, as far as the eye could reach; or at the Air Fairs of the Middle Lands, flying, beribboned, for the delectation of the Master and his aides. It was here though, in the blustering dark, that the mettle of the Captains and their crews was truly tested.

All now depended on the Controller atop the launcher. I saw him turn, straining his eyes up into the night, stretch a gauntleted hand to the heavy trace. Five hundred feet or more above, the pilot flew invisible; below, the lifters spread out in their line, straining at their bridles of steel rope. The rig was aloft; but the slightest failure, the parting of a shackle, the slipping of an ill-secured clamp, could still spell disaster. All was well however; the Ground Controller pulled at the trace again, gauging the angle and tension of the cable, and the final signal was given. I craned forward,

intrigued despite myself, brushed with a glove at the cloudy glass.

Quite suddenly, or so it seemed, the Observer was on the apron. A white-robed acolyte, his fair hair streaming, took from his shoulders his brilliant cloak of office. Beneath it he was dressed from head to foot in stout black leather; kneebots, tunic and trews, closefitting helmet. He turned once to stare up at the hangar front. I made out the pale blur of his face, the hard, high cheekbones; his eyes though were invisible, protected by massive goggles. He saluted, formally yet it seemed with an indefinable air of derision, turned on his heel and strode toward the launch vehicle. I doubt though that he could have made out either the Kitecaptain or myself.

The ground crew scurried again. Moving with practised, almost military precision, they wheeled the basket forward; the Observer climbed aboard, and the rest was a matter of skilled, split-second timing. The manlifter, shielded at first by the hangar from the full force of the wind, swayed wildly, wrenching at its restraining ropes. Men ran back across the grass; the steam winch clattered and the whole equipage was rising into the night, the Observer already working at the tail-down tackle that would give him extra height. The winch settled to a steady, gentle clanking; and the Captain wiped his face. I turned to him. "Congratulations," I said. "A splendid launch."

Somewhere, distantly, a bell began to clang.

"They're all launched," he said thickly. "Right up to G6 in the northwest Salient; and south, down through the Marches. The whole Sector's flying; for what good it'll serve." He glowered at me. "You understand, of course, the principles involved?" he said sarcastically.

"Assuredly," I replied. "Air flows above the manlifter's surfaces faster than beneath them, thus becoming rarified. The good Lord abhors a vacuum; so any wing may be induced to rise."

He seemed determined not to be mollified. "Excellent," he said. "I see you've swallowed a textbook or two. There's a bit more to it than that though. If you'd ever flown yourself, you wouldn't be so glib."

I lowered my eyes. I knew, well enough, the dip and surge of a Cody basket; but it was no part of my intention to engage him in a game of apologetics. Instead I said, "Tell me about Canwen."

He stared at me, then nodded to the valise. He said, "You've got his file."

"Files don't say everything," I said. "I asked you, Kitecaptain."

He turned away, stood hands on hips and stared down at the launcher. "He's a flier," he said at length. "The finest we've got left. What else is there to say?"

I persisted. "You've known him long?"

"Since I first joined the Corps," he said. "We were cadets together." He swung back, suddenly. "Where's all this leading, Helman?"

"Who knows?" I said. "Perhaps to understanding."

He brought his palm down flat upon the desk. "Understanding?" he shouted. "Who in all the Hells needs understanding? It's explanations we're after, man..."

"Me too," I said pointedly. "That's why I'm here."

He flung an arm out. "Up in K7," he said, "an Observer slipped his own trace one fine night, floated off into the Badlands. I knew him too; and they don't come any better. Another sawed his wrists apart, up

there on his own; and he'd been flying thirty years. Last week we lost three more; while you and all the rest sit trying to understand..."

A tapping sounded at the door. It opened to his shout; a nervous looking Cadet stood framed, his eyes on the floor. "The Quartermaster send his compliments," he stammered, "and begs to know if the Kite-master — I mean My Lord — wishes some refreshment..."

I shook my head; but the Captain picked the bottle up, tossed it across the room. "Yes," he said, "get me some more of this muck. Break it out of stores, if you have to; I'll sign the chitty later." The lad scurried away on his errand; the other stood silent and brooding till he returned. Below, on the apron, the ratchet of the winch clattered suddenly; a pause, and the smooth upward flight was continued. The Captain stared out moodily, screwed the cap from the fresh bottle and drank. "You'll be telling me next," he said, "they've fallen foul of demons."

I turned, sharply. For a moment I wondered if he had taken leave of his senses; he seemed however fully in command of himself. "Yes," he said, "you heard me right first time." He filled the glass again. "How long has it really been," he said, "since the Corps was formed? Since the very first kite flew?"

"The Corps has always been," I said, "and always will be. It is the Way..."

He waved a hand dismissively. "Save it for those who need it," he said brutally. "Don't start preaching your sermons in here." He leaned on the desk. "Tell me," he said, "what was the real idea? Who dreamed it up?"

I could I suppose have remained silent, or quit his company; but it seemed that beneath the bluster there lay something else. A questioning, almost a species of appeal. It was as if something in him yet needed confirmation of his heresy; the confirmation, perhaps, of argument. Certainly I understood his dilemma, in part at least; it was a predicament that in truth was by no means new to me. "The Corps was formed," I said, "to guard the Western Realm, and keep its borders safe."

"From demons," he said bitterly. "From demons and night walkers, all spirits that bring harm..." He quoted, savagely, from the Litany. "Some plunge, invisible, from highest realms of air; some have the shapes of fishes, flying; some, and these be the hardest to descry, cling close upon the hills and very treetops..." I raised a hand, but he rushed on regardless. "These last be deadliest of all," he snarled. "For to these the Evil One hath given semblance of a Will, to seek out and destroy their prey... Crap!" He pounded the desk again. "All crap," he said, "every last syllable. The Corps fell for it though, every man jack of us. You crook your little fingers, and we run; we float up there like fools, with a pistol in one hand and a prayerbook in the other, waiting to shoot down bogles, while you live off the fat of the land..."

I turned away from the window and sat down. "Enough," I said tiredly. "Enough, I pray you..."

"We're not the only ones of course," he said. He struck an attitude. "Some burst from the salt ocean," he mocked, "clad overall in living flame..." So the Seaguard ride out there by night and day, with magic potions ready to stop the storms... He choked, and steadied himself. "Now I'll tell you, Helman," he said, breathing hard. "I'll tell you, and you'll listen. There

are no demons; not in the sky, not on the land, not in the sea. . ."

I looked away. "I envy," I said slowly, "the sureness of your knowledge."

He walked up to me. "Is that all you've got to say?" he shouted. "You hypocritical bastard. . ." He leaned forward. "Good men have died in plenty," he said, "to keep the folk in fear, and you in your proper state. Twenty years I flew, till I got this; and I'll say it again, as loud and clear as you like. There are no demons. . ." He swung away. "There's something for your report," he said. "There's a titbit for you. . ."

I am not readily moved to anger. Enraged, we lose awareness; and awareness is our only gift from God. His last remark though irritated me beyond measure. He'd already said more than enough to be relieved of his command; enough, indeed, to warrant a court martial in Middlemarch itself. And a conviction, were I to place the information before the proper authorities. The sneer reduced me to the level of a Variant spy, peeping at keyholes, prying into ledgers. "You fool," I said slowly. "You arrogant, unreasoning fool. . ."

He stared, fists clenched. "Arrogant?" he said. "You call me arrogant. You. . .?"

I stood up, paced back to the window. "Aye, arrogant," I said. "Beyond all measure, and beyond all sense." I swung back. "Will you be chastised," I said bitterly, "like a first year Chaplain, stumbling in the Litany? If that's the height of your desire, it can readily be accomplished. . ."

He sat back at the desk, spread his hands on its dull-painted top. "What do you want of me?" he said.

"The courtesy with which you're being used," I said. "For the sake of Heaven, man, act your age. . ."

He drained the glass slowly, and set it down. He stretched his hand toward the bottle, changed his mind. Finally he looked up, under lowering brows. "You take a lot on yourself, Helman," he said. "If any other spoke to me like that, I'd kill him."

"Another easy option," I said shortly. "You're fuller of them than a beggar's dog of fleas." I shook my head. "You alone, of all the Lord's creation," I said. "You alone, beg leave to doubt your Faith. And claim it as a novel sentiment. . ."

He frowned again. "If you'd ever flown. . ."

"I've flown," I said.

He looked up. "You've seen the Badlands?" he asked sharply.

I nodded. "Yes," I said. "I have."

He took the bottle anyway, poured another drink. "It changes you," he said. "For all time." He picked the glass up, toyed with it. "Folk reckon nothing lives out there," he said grimly. "Only demons. I could wish they were right." He paused. "Sometimes on a clear day, flying low, you see. . .more than a man should see. But they're not demons. I think once, they were folk as well. Like us. . ."

I folded my arms. I too was seeing the Badlands, in my mind; the shining vista of them spread by night, as far as the eye could reach. The hills and valleys twinkling, like a bed of coals; but all a ghastly blue.

It seemed he read my thoughts. "Yes," he said, "it's something to look at all right. . ." He drank, suddenly, as if to erase the memory. "It's strange," he said, "but over the years, I wonder if a flyer doesn't get to see with more than his normal eyes." He rubbed his face. "Sometimes," he said, "I'd see them stretching out

farther and farther, all round the world; and nothing left at all, except the Kingdom. One little corner of a little land. That wasn't demons either though. I think men did it, to each other." He laughed. "But I'm forgetting, aren't I?" he said bitterly. "While the Watching goes on, it can never happen here. . ."

I touched my lip. I wasn't going to be drawn back into an area of barren cant. "I sometimes wonder,"

I said carefully, "if it's not all merely a form of words. Does it matter, finally, how we describe an agent of Hell? Does it make it any more real? Or less?"

"Why, there you go," he cried, with a return to something of his former manner. "Can't beat a good Church training, that's what I always say. A little bit here, a little bit there, clawing back the ground you've lost; nothing ever alters for you, does it? Face you with reality though; that's when you start to wriggle. . ."

"And why not?" I said calmly. "It's all that's left to do. Reality is the strangest thing any of us will ever encounter; the one thing, certainly, that we'll never understand. Wriggle though we may."

He waved his glass. "I tell you what I'll do," he said. "I'll propose a small experiment. You say the Watching keeps us from all harm. . ."

I shook my head. "I say the Realm is healthy, and that its fields are green."

He narrowed his eyes for a moment. "Well then," he said. "For a month, we'll ground the Cody rigs. And call in all the Seaguard. That would prove it, wouldn't it? One way or the other. . ."

"Perhaps," I said. "You might pay dearly for the knowledge though."

He slammed the glass down. "And what," he said, "if your precious fields stayed green? Would you concede the point?"

"I would concede," I said gently, "that Hell had been inactive for a span."

He flung his head back and guffawed. The laughter was not altogether of a pleasant kind. "Helman," he said, "you're bloody priceless." He uncapped the bottle, poured. "I'll tell you a little story," he said. "We were well off, when I was a youngster. Big place out in the Westmarch; you'd better believe it. Only we lost the lot. My father went off his head. Not in a nasty way, you understand; he never hurt a fly, right through his life. But every hour on the hour, for the last ten years, he waved a kerchief from the tower window, to scare off little green men. And you know what? We never saw a sign of one, not all the time he lived." He sat back. "What do you say to that?"

I smiled. "I'd say, that he had rediscovered Innocence. And taught you all a lesson; though at the time, maybe you didn't see."

He swore, with some violence. "Lesson?" he cried. "What lesson lies in that?"

"That logic may have circular propensities," I said. "Or approach the condition of a sphere; the ultimate, incompressible form."

He pushed the bottle away, staring; and I burst out laughing at the expression on his face. "Man," I said, "you can't put Faith into a test tube, prove it with a piece of litmus paper. . ."

A flash of brilliance burst in through the windows. It was followed by a long and velvet growl. A bell began to sound, closer than before. I glanced across to the Kite-

captain; but he shook his head. He said harshly, "Observation altitude. . ."

I lifted the valise onto the desk edge, unlocked it once more. I assembled the receiver, set up the shallow repeater cone with its delicate central reed. The other stared, eyes widening. "What're you doing?" he croaked.

"My function is to listen," I said curtly. "And as I told you, maybe to understand. I've heard you; now we'll see what Canwen has to say." I advanced the probe to the crystal; the cone vibrated instantly, filling the room with the rushing of the wind, the high, musical thrumming of the Cody rig.

The Captain sprang away, face working. "Necromancy," he said hoarsely. "I'll not have it; not on my Base. . ."

"Be quiet," I snapped. "You impress me not at all; you have more wit than that." I touched a control; and the Observer roared with laughter. "The tail-down rig of course," he said. "New since your day. . ."

The other stared at the receiver; then through the window at the launch vehicle, the thread of cable stretching into the dark. "Who's he talking to?" he whispered.

I glanced up. "His father was a flier, was he not?"

The Kitecaptain moistened his lips. "His father died over the Salient," he said. "Twenty years ago."

I nodded. "Yes," I said, "I know." Rain spattered sudden against the panes; I adjusted the control and the wind shrilled again, louder than before. Mixed as it was with the singing of the cables, there was an eerie quality to the sound; almost it was as if a voice called, thin and distant at first then circling closer. Canwen's answer was a great shout of joy. "Quickly, Pater, help me," he cried urgently. "Don't let her go again. . ." Gasps sounded; the basketwork creaked in protest and there was a close thump, as if some person, or some thing, had indeed been hauled aboard. The Observer began to laugh. "Melissa," he said. "Melissa, oh my love. . ."

"His wife," I supplied. "A most beautiful and gracious lady. Died of childbed fever, ten years ago in Middlemarch. . ."

"What?" cried Canwen. "What?" Then, "Yes, I see it. . ." A snapping sounded, as he tore the Great Seal from the basket; and he began to laugh again. "They honour us, beloved," he cried. "The Church employs thaumaturgy against us. . ."

The Kitecaptain gave a wild shout. "No," he cried, "I'll hear no more of it. . ." I wrestled with him, but I was too late. He snatched the receiver, held it on high and dashed it to the floor. The delicate components shattered; and the room fell silent, but for the close sound of the wind.

The pause was of brief duration. Lightning flared again; then instantly the storm was all around us. Crash succeeded crash, shaking the very floor on which I stood; the purple flickering became continuous.

The Captain started convulsively; then it seemed he collected himself. "Down Rig," he shouted hoarsely. "We must fetch him down. . ."

"No," I cried, "no. . ." I barred his way; for a moment my upflung arm, the sudden glitter of the Master's Staff, served to check him, then he had barged me aside. I tripped and fell, heavily. His feet clattered on the gantry steps; by the time I had regained my feet his

thick voice was already echoing through the hangar. "Down Rig. . .Down Rig, for your lives. . ."

I followed a little dazedly, ran across the cluttered floor of the place. The great end doors had been closed; I groped for the wicket, and the wind snatched it from my hand. My robes flogged round me; I pressed my back to the high metal, offered up a brief and fervent prayer. Before me the main winch of the launcher already screamed, the great drum spun; smoke or steam arose from where the wildly-driven cable snaked through its fairleads. Men ran to the threatened points with water buckets, white robed Medics scurried; Cadets, hair streaming, stood by with hatchets in their hands, to cut the lifter's rigging at a need. I stared up, shielding my face against the glaring arcs; and a cry of "View-ho" arose. Although I could not myself descry it, sharper eyes than mine had made out the descending basket. I started forward; next instant the field was lit by an immense white flash.

For a moment, it was as if Time itself was slowed. I saw a man, his arms flung out, hurled headlong from the launcher; fragments of superstructure, blown outward by the force of the concussion, arced into the air; the vehicle's cab, its wheels, the tautened anchor cables, each seemed lit with individual fire. The lightning bolt sped upward, haloing the main trace with its vivid glare; then it was as if the breath had been snatched from my lungs. I crashed to the ground again half stunned, saw through floating spots of colour how a young Cadet, blood on his face, ran forward to the winch gear. He flung his weight against the tallest of the levers, and the screaming stopped. The man-lifter, arrested within its last few feet of travel, crashed sideways, spilling the Observer unceremoniously onto the grass. A shackle parted somewhere, dimly heard through the ringing in my ears; the axes flashed, a cable end lashed viciously above my head. The lifter train whirled off into the dark, and was gone.

I got to my feet, staggered toward Canwen. By the time I reached him, the Medics were already busy. They raised him onto the stretcher they wheeled forward; his head lolled, but at sight of me he rallied. He raised an arm, eyes blazing, made as if to speak; then he collapsed, lying still as death, and was borne rapidly away.

The eastern sky was lightening as I packed the valise for the final time. I closed the lock hasp, clicked it shut; and the door was tapped. A fair-haired Cadet entered, bearing steaming mugs on a tray. I smiled at him. A fresh white bandage circled his brow, and he was a little pale; but he looked uncommon proud.

I turned to the Base Medic, a square-set, ruddy-faced man. I said, "So you think Canwen will live?"

"Good God, yes," he said cheerfully. "Be up and about in a day or two at the latest. He's survived half a dozen calls like that already; I think this gives him the record. . ." The door closed behind him.

I sipped. The brew was dark and bitter; but at least it was hot. "Well," I said, "I must be on my way. Thank you for your hospitality, Kitecaptain; and my compliments to all concerned for their handling of last night's emergency."

He rubbed his face uncertainly. "Will you not stay,"



he said, "and break your fast with us properly?"

I shook my head. "Out of the question I'm afraid," I said. "I'm due at G15 by 0900 hours. But I thank you all the same." I hefted the valise, and smiled again. "Its Captain, I've no doubt, will have had too much to drink," I said. "I shall probably hear some very interesting heresy."

He preceded me through the now-silent hangar. To one side a group of men was engaged in laying out long wire traces; but there were few other signs of activity. Outside, the air struck chill and sweet after the storm; by the main gate my transport waited, in charge of a smartly uniformed chauffeur/acolyte. I began to walk toward it; the Captain paced beside me, his chin sunk on his chest, still it seemed deep in thought. "What's your conclusion?" he asked abruptly.

"About the recent loss rate?" I said. I shook my head. "An all round lessening of morale, leading to a certain slackness; all except here of course," I added as his mouth began to open. It's a lonely and thankless life for all the Cody teams; nobody is more aware of it than I.

He stopped, and turned toward me. "What's to do about it then?" he said.

"Do?" I shrugged. "Send Canwen to have a chat with them. He'll tell them he's seen the Face of God. If he doesn't, go yourself..."

He frowned. "About the thaumaturgy. The things we heard..."

I began to walk again. "I've heard them often enough before," I said. "I don't place all that much importance on them. It's a strange world, in the sky; we must all come to terms with it as best we may." Which is true enough; sometimes, to preserve one's sanity, it's best to become just a little mad.

He frowned again. "Then the report..."

"Has already been made," I said. "You gave it yourself, last night. I don't think I really have very much to add." I glanced across to him. "You'd have been best advised," I said, "to leave him flying, not draw him down through the eye of the storm. But you'd have seen that for yourself, had you not been under a certain strain at the time."

"You mean if I hadn't been drunk," he said bluntly. "And all the time I thought..." He squared his shoulders. "It won't happen again, Kitemaster; I'll guarantee you that."

"No," I said softly, "I don't suppose it will."

He shook his head. "I thought for a moment," he said, "it was a judgement on me. I'd certainly been asking for it..."

This time I hid the smile behind my hand. That's the whole trouble, of course, with your amateur theologians. Always expecting God to peer down from the height, His fingers to His nose, for their especial benefit.

We had reached the vehicle. The acolyte saluted briskly, opened the rear door with its brightly blazoned crest. I stooped inside, and turned to button down the window. "Goodbye, Kitecaptain," I said.

He stuck his hand out. "God go with you," he said gruffly. He hesitated. "Someday," he said, "I'll come and visit you. At that bloody Summer palace..."

"Do," I said. "You'll be honourably received; as is your due. And Captain..."

He leaned close.

"Do something for me in the meantime," I said. "Keep the Codys flying; till something better comes along..."

He stepped back, saluting stiffly; then put his hands on his hips, stared after the vehicle. He was still staring when a bend of the green, rutted track took him from sight.

I leaned back against the cushioning, squeezed the bridge of my nose and closed my eyes. I felt oddly cheered. On the morrow, my tour of duty would be ended. They would crown a new May Queen, in Middlemarch; children would run to see me, their hair bedecked with flowers, and I would touch their hands.

I sat up, opened the file on Kitebase G15. A mile or so farther on though I tapped the glass screen in front of me and the chauffeur drew obediently to a halt. I watched back to where, above the shoulders of the hills, a Cody rig rose slowly, etched against the flaring yellow dawn.

Keith Roberts also began his writing career in the pages of *Science Fantasy* in the mid-1960s (and he was for a time an assistant editor of that magazine). A gifted illustrator as well as a novelist, his best-known SF work is the alternate world tale *Pavane* (1968). His most recent books are the collection *Ladies from Hell* (1979) and the novel *Molly Zero* (1980).

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## INTERZONE

Interzone is an imaginary city beyond the limits, just where the white lines start to break up at last: between the pages of the map, or on a sign at the side of the road, a name caught for an instant in juggernaut headlights. The juggernaut is carrying a load of identical shiny fat paperbacks, like shrink-wrapped housebricks only with a shelf-life of two and a half weeks. After this time they will disintegrate in silence, obsolete, unread. The juggernauts grind on, going in the other direction. Meanwhile the caravan has arrived at the outskirts of Interzone: custom-built pantech-nicons, singular constructions of aluminium or bronze. Many of these vehicles look as if they have come from the future, or from a different planet. All are perfectly styled, but have no number-plates. We can tell at a glance that their drivers have everything to declare. The border-guards are too busy to look up (they are writing stories of their own). The barriers are open.

The districts of Interzone have no names, though many may be as distinct and familiar as Viriconium or Vermilion Sands. The streets run like an excited argument, at tangents. Here are some of our most famous buildings, properties of founders and first tenants: William Burroughs' All-Nite Drugstore; Angela Carter's observatory, a latter-day construction on Gothic principles; Michael Moorcock's celebrated brothel, that most orderly of disorderly houses. Most of the lots are empty, however, or bankrupt holdings ideal for redevelopment. Interzone is logical and necessary, like any dream; yet it is open to the nomad, and can be rearranged to suit. Every season a different city. All maps mislead. No bystander is innocent. Rounours abound, on corners in and out of the wind.

You will find Interzone now on every conceivable route, like a major intersection where everybody has to change, if only their minds.

A place where the unknown past and the emergent future meet in a vibrating soundless hum.

Colin Greenland



# THE CABINET OF EDGAR ALLAN POE ANGELA CARTER



**I** imagine Poe in the Republic! when he possesses none of its virtues; no Spartan, he. Each time he tilts the jug to greet the austere morning, his sober friends reluctantly concur: "No man is safe who drinks before breakfast." Where is the black star of melancholy? Elsewhere; not here. Here it is always morning; stern, democratic light scrubs apparitions off the streets down which his dangerous feet must go.

Perhaps... perhaps the black star of melancholy was hiding in the dark at the bottom of the jug all the time... it might be the whole thing is a little secret between the jug and himself...

He turns back to go and look; and the pitiless light of common day hits him full in the face like a blow from the eye of God. Struck, he reels. Where can he hide, where there are no shadows? They split the Republic in two, they halved the apple of knowledge, white light strikes the top half and leaves the rest in shadow; up here, up north, in the levelling latitudes, a man must make his own penumbra if he wants concealment because the massive, heroic light of the Republic admits of no ambiguities. Either you are a saint; or a stranger. He is a stranger, here, a gentleman up from Virginia somewhat down on his luck, and, alas, he may not invoke the Prince of Darkness (always a perfect gentleman) in his cause since, of the absolute night which is the antithesis to these days of rectitude, there is no aristocracy.

Poe staggers under the weight of the Declaration of Independence. People think he is drunk.

He is drunk.

The prince in exile lurches through the new-found land.

**S**o you say he overacts? Very well; he overacts. There is a past history of histrionics in his family.

His mother was, as they say, born in a trunk, greasepaint in her bloodstream, and made her first appearance on any stage in her ninth summer in a hiss-the-villain melodrama entitled *Mysteries of the*

Castle. It was the evening of the eighteenth century; twilight falls on the Age of Reason.

Poe's future mother skipped onto a stage in the fresh-hatched American republic to sing an old-world ballad clad in the pretty rags of a ballet gypsy. Her dancer's grace, piping treble, dark curls, rosy cheeks – cute kid! And eyes with something innocent, something appealing in them that struck directly to the heart so that the smoky auditorium broke out in raucous sentimental cheers for her and clapped its leather palms together with a will. A star was born that night in the rude firmament of fit-ups and candle-footlights, but she was to be a shooting star; she flickered briefly in the void, she continued the inevitable trajectory of the meteor, downward. She hit the boards and trod them.

But, well after puberty, she was still able, thanks to her low stature and slim build, to continue to personate children, clever little ducks and prattlers of both sexes. Yet she was versatility personified; she could do you Ophelia, too.

She had a low, melodious voice of singular sweetness, an excellent thing in a woman. When crazed Ophelia handed round the rosemary and rue and sang: "He is dead and gone, lady," not a dry eye in the house, I assure you. She also tried her hand at Juliet and Cordelia and, if necessary, could personate the merriest soubrette; even when racked by the nauseas of her pregnancies, still she would smile, would smile and oh! the dazzling candour of her teeth!

**O**ut popped her firstborn, Henry; her second, Edgar, came jostling after to share her knee with her scripts and suckle at her bosom meanwhile she learned her lines, yet she was always word-perfect even when she played two parts in the one night, Ophelia or Juliet and then, say, Little Pickle, the cute kid in the afterpiece, for the audiences of those days refused to leave the theatre after a tragedy unless the players changed costumes and came back to give them

a little something extra to cheer them up again.

Little Pickle was a trousers role. She ran back to the green room and undid the top buttons of her waistcoat to let out a sore, milky breast to pacify little Edgar who, wakened by the hoots and catcalls that had greeted her too voluptuous imitation of a boy, likewise howled and screamed.

A mug of porter or a bottle of whisky stood on the dressing table all the time. She dipped a plug of cotton in whisky and gave it to Edgar to suck when he would not stop crying.

**T**he father of her children was a bad actor and only ever carried a spear in the many companies in which she worked. He often stayed behind in the green room to look after the little ones. David Poe tipped a tumbler of neat gin to Edgar's lips to keep him quiet. The red-eyed Angel of Intemperance hopped out of the bottle of ardent spirits and snuggled down in little Edgar's longclothes. Meanwhile, on stage, her final child, in utero, stitched its flesh and bones together as best it could under the corset that preserved the theatrical illusion of Mrs Elizabeth Poe's eighteen inch waist until the eleventh hour, the tenth month.

Applause rocked round the wooden o. Loving mother that she was – for we have no reason to believe that she was not – Mrs Poe exited the painted scene to cram her jewels on her knee while tired tears ran rivers through her rouge and splashed upon their peaky faces. The monotonous clamour of their parents' argument sent them at last to sleep but the unborn one in the womb pressed its transparent hands over its vestigial ears in terror.

(To be born at all might be the worst thing.)

However, born at last this last child was, one July afternoon in a cheap theatrical boarding house in New York City after many hours on a rented bed while flies buzzed at the windowpanes. Edgar and Henry, on a palette on the floor, held hands. The midwife had to use a pair of blunt iron tongs to scoop out the reluctant wee thing; the sheet was tented up over Mrs Poe's lower half for modesty so the toddlers saw nothing except the midwife brandishing her dreadful instrument and then they heard the shrill cry of the newborn describing a jagged arc in the exhausted silence like the sound of the blade of a skate on ice and something was twitching between the midwife's pincers, bloody as a fresh-pulled tooth.

David Poe spent his wife's confinement in a nearby tavern, wetting the baby's head. When he came back and saw the mess he vomited.

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Then, before his sons' bewildered eyes, their father began to grow insubstantial. He unbecame. All at once he lost his outlines and began to waver on the air. It was twilight evening. Mama slept on the bed with a fresh mauve bud of flesh in a basket on the chair beside her. The air shuddered with the beginning of absence.

He said not one word to his boys but went on evaporating until he melted clean away, leaving behind him in the room as proof he had been there only a puddle of puke on the splintered wooden floor.

**A**s soon as the deserted wife got out of bed, she posted down to Virginia with her howling brats because she was booked for a tour of the South and she had no money put away so all the babies got to eat was her sweat. She dragged them with her in a trunk to Charleston; to Norfolk; then back to Richmond.

**D**own there, it is the foetid height of summer. Stripped to her chemise in the airless dressing-room, she milks her sore breasts into a glass; this latest baby must be weaned before its mother dies.

**S**he coughed. She slapped more, yet more rouge on her now haggard cheeksbones. "My children! what will become of my children?" Her eyes glittered and soon acquired a febrile brilliance that was not of this world. Soon she needed no rouge at all; red spots brighter than rouge appeared of their own accord on her cheeks while veins as blue as those in Stilton cheese but muscular, palpitating, prominent, lithe, stood out on her forehead. In Little Pickle's vest and breeches it was not now possible for her to create the least suspension of disbelief and something desperate, something fatal in her distracted playing both fascinated and appalled the witnesses, who could have thought they saw the living features of death itself upon her face. Her mirror, the actress's friend, the magic mirror in which she sees whom she has become, no longer acknowledged any but a death's head.

The moist, sullen, Southern winter signed her quietus. She put on Ophelia's madwoman's nightgown for her farewell.

When she summoned him, the spectral horseman came. Edgar looked out of the window and saw him. The soundless hooves of black-plumed horses struck sparks from the stones in the road outside. "Father!" said Edgar; he thought their father must have reconstituted himself at this last extremity in order to transport them all to a better place but, when he looked more closely, by the light of the gibbous moon, he saw the sockets of the coachman's eyes were full of worms.

**T**hey told her children that now she could come back to take no curtain-calls no matter how fiercely all applauded the manner of her going. Lovers of the theatre plied her hearse with bouquets: "And from her pure and uncorrupted flesh May violets spring." (Not a dry eye in the house.) The three orphaned infants were dispersed into the bosoms of charitable protectors. Each gave the clay-cold cheek a final kiss; then they too kissed and parted, Edgar from Henry, Henry from the tiny one who did not move or cry but lay still and kept her eyes tight shut. When

shall these three meet again. The church bell tolled: never never never never never.

Kind Mr Allan of Virginia, Edgar's own particular benefactor, who would buy his bread henceforward, took his charge's little hand and led him from the funeral. Edgar parted his name in the middle to make room for Mr Allan inside it. Edgar was then three years old. Mr Allan ushered him into Southern affluence, down there; but do not think his mother left Edgar empty handed, although the dead actress was able to leave him only what could not be taken away from him, to whit, a few tattered memories.

#### TESTAMENT OF MRS ELIZABETH POE

Item: nourishment. A tit sucked in a green room, the dug snatched away from the toothless lips as soon as her cue came, so that, of nourishment, he would retain only the memory of hunger and thirst endlessly unsatisfied.

Item: transformation. This is a more ambivalent relic. Something like this... Edgar would lie in prop-baskets on heaps of artificial finery and watch her while she painted her face. The candles made a profane altar of the mirror in which her vague face swam like a magic fish. If you caught hold of it, it would make your dreams come true but Mama slithered through all the nets desire set out to catch her.

She stuck glass jewels in her ears, pinned back her nut brown hair and tied a muslin bandage round her head, looking like a corpse for a minute. Then on went the yellow wig. Now you see her, now you don't; Brunette turns blonde in the wink of an eye.

Mama turns round to show how she has changed into the lovely lady he glimpsed in the mirror.

"Don't touch me, you'll mess me."

And vanishes in a susurrant of taffeta.

Item: that women possess within them a cry, a thing that needs to be extracted... but this is only the dimmest of memories and will reassert itself in vague shapes of unmentionable dread only at the prospect of carnal connection.

Item: the awareness of mortality. For, as soon as her last child was born, if not before, she started to rehearse in private the long part of dying; once she began to cough she had no option.

Item: a face, the perfect face of a tragic actor, his face, white skin stretched tight over fine, white bones in a final state of wonderfully lucid emaciation.

**I**gnited by the tossed butt of a still-smouldering cigar that had lodged in the cracks of the uneven floorboards, the theatre at Richmond where Mrs Poe had made her last appearance burned to the ground three weeks after her death. Ashes. Although Mr Allan told Edgar that all of his mother that was mortal had been buried in her coffin, Edgar knew that the somebody elses she so frequently became lived in her dressing table mirror and were not constrained by the physical laws that made her body rot. But now the mirror, too, was gone; and all the lovely and untouchable, volatile, unreal mothers went up together in a puff of smoke on a pyre of props and painted scenery.

The sparks from this conflagration rose high in the air, where they lodged in the sky to become a constellation of stars that only Edgar saw and then only on certain still nights of summer, those hot, rich, blue,

mellow nights that the slaves have brought from Africa, weather that ferments the music of exile, weather of heartbreak and fever. (Oh, those voluptuous nights, like something forbidden!) High in the sky these invisible stars marked the points of a face folded in sorrow.

**Nature of the theatrical illusion:** everything you see is false.

Consider the theatrical illusion with special reference to this impressionable child, who was exposed to it at an age when there is no reason for anything to be real.

He must often have toddled onto the stage when the theatre was empty and the curtains down so all was like a parlour prepared for a séance, waiting for the moment when the eyes of the observers make the mystery.

Here he will find a painted backdrop of, say, an antique castle – a castle! such as they don't build here; a Gothic castle all complete with owls and ivy. The flies are painted with segments of trees, massy oaks or something like that, all in two dimensions. Artificial shadows fall in all the wrong places. Nothing is what it seems. You knock against a gilded throne or horrid wrack that looks perfectly solid, thick and immovable, but when you kick it sideways, it turns out to be made of papier mâché, it is as light as air – a child, you yourself, could pick it up and carry it off with you and sit in it and be a king or lie in it and be in pain.

A creaking, an ominous rattling scares the little wits out of you; when you jump round to see what is going on behind your back, why, the very castle is in mid-air! Heave-ho and up she rises, amid the inarticulate cries and muttered oaths of the stagehands, and down comes Juliet's tomb or Ophelia's sepulchre, and a super scuttles in, clutching Yorick's skull.

The foul-mouthed whores who dandle you on their pillow laps and tip mugs of sour porter against your lips now congregate in the wings, where they have turned into nuns or something. On the invisible side of the plush curtain that cuts you off from the beery, importunate, tobacco-stained multitude that has paid its pennies on the nail to watch these transcendent rituals now come the thumps, bangs and clatter that make the presence of their expectations felt. A stage hand swoops down to scoop you up and carry you off, protesting, to where Henry, like a good boy, is already deep in his picture book and there is a poke of candy for you and the corner of a handkerchief dipped in moonshine and Mama in crown and train presses her rouged lips softly on your forehead before she goes down before the mob.

On his brow her rouged lips left the mark of Cain.

**H**aving, at an impressionable age, seen with his own eyes the nature of the mystery of the castle – that all its horrors are so much painted cardboard and yet they terrify you – he saw another mystery and made less sense of it.

Now and then, as a great treat, if he kept quiet as a mouse, because he begged and pleaded so, he was allowed to stay in the wings and watch; the round-eyed baby saw that Ophelia could, if necessary, die twice nightly. All her burials were premature.

A couple of brawny supers carried Mama on stage

in Act Four, wrapped in a shroud, tipped her into the cellage amidst displays of grief from all concerned but up she would pop at certain call having shaken the dust off her graveclothes and touched up her eye make-up, to curtsy with the rest of the resurrected immortals, all of whom, even Prince Hamlet himself, turned out, in the end, to be just as un-dead as she.

How could he, then, truly believe she would not come again, although, in the black suit that Mr Allan provided for him out of charity, he toddled behind her coffin to the cemetery? Surely, one fine day, the spectral coachman would return again, climb down from his box, throw open the carriage door and out she would step wearing the white nightdress in which he had last seen her, although he hoped this garment had been laundered in the interim since he last saw it all bloody from a haemorrhage.

Then a transparent constellation in the night sky would blink out; the scattered atoms would reassemble themselves to the entire and perfect Mama and he would run directly to her arms.

**I**t is mid-morning of the nineteenth century. He grows up under the black stars of the slave states. He flinches from that part of women the sheet hid. He becomes a man.

**A**s soon as he becomes a man, affluence departs from Edgar. The heart and pocketbook that Mr Allan opened to the child now pull themselves together to expel. Edgar shakes the dust of the sweet South off his heels. He hies north, up here, to seek his fortune in the places where the light does not permit that chiaroscuro he loves; nevertheless, now Edgar Poe must live by his disordered wits.

**T**he dug was snatched from the milky mouth and tucked away inside the bodice; the mirror no longer reflected Mama but, instead, a perfect stranger. He offered her his hand; smiling a tranced smile, she stepped out of the frame.

"My darling, my sister, my life and my bride!"

He was not put out by the tender years of this young girl whom he soon married; was she not just Juliet's age, just thirteen summers?

The magnificent tresses forming great shadowed eaves above her high forehead were the raven tint of nevermore, black as his suits the seams of which his devoted mother-in-law painted with ink so that they would not advertise to the world the signs of wear and, nowadays, he always wore a suit of sables, dressed in readiness for the next funeral in a black coat buttoned up to the stock and he never betrayed his absolute mourning by so much as one flash of white shirtfront. Sometimes, when his wife's mother was not there to wash and starch his linen, he economised on laundry bills and wore no shirt at all.

His long hair brushes the collar of this coat, from which poverty has worn off the nap. How sad his eyes are; there is too much of sorrow in his infrequent smile to make you happy when he smiles at you and so much of bitter gall, also, that you might mistake his smile for a grimace or a grue except when he smiles at his young wife with her forehead like a tombstone. Then he will smile and smile with as much posthumous tenderness as if he saw already: *Dearly Beloved Wife Of ...* carved above her eyebrows.

For her skin was white as marble and she was called – would you believe! – "Virginia", a name that suited his expatriate's nostalgia and also her condition, for the child – bride would remain a virgin until the day she died.

Imagine the sinless children lying in bed together! The pity of it!

For did she not come to him stiffly armoured in taboos – taboos against the violation of children; taboos against the violation of the dead – for, not to put too fine a point on it, didn't she always look like a walking corpse? But such a pretty, pretty corpse!

And, besides, isn't an undemanding, economic, decorative corpse the perfect wife for a gentleman in reduced circumstances, upon whom the four walls of paranoia are always about to converge?

Virginia Clemm. In the dialect of Northern England, to be "clemmed" is to be very cold. "I'm fair clemmed." Virginia Clemm.

She brought with her a hardy, durable, industrious mother of her own, to clean and cook and keep accounts for them and to outlive them, and to outlive them both.

**V**irginia was a perfect child and never ceased to be so. The slow years passed and she stayed as she had been at thirteen, a simple little thing whose sweet disposition was his only comfort and who never ceased to lisp, even when she started to rehearse the long part of dying.

She was light on her feet as a revenant. You would have thought she never bent a stem of grass as she passed across their little garden. When she spoke, when she sang, how sweet her voice was; she kept her harp in their cottage parlour, which her mother swept and polished until all was like a new pin. A few guests gathered there to partake of the Poes' modest hospitality. There was his brilliant conversation though his women saw to it that only tea was served, since all knew his dreadful weakness for liquor, but Virginia poured out with so much simple grace that everyone was charmed.

They begged her to take her seat at her harp and accompany herself in an Old World ballad or two. Eddy nodded gladly: "Yes," and she lightly struck the strings with white hands of which the long, thin fingers were so fine and waxen that you would have thought you could have set light to the tips to make of her hand the flaming Hand of Glory that casts all the inhabitants of the house, except the magician himself, into a profound and death-like sleep.

She sings: Cold blows the wind, tonight, my love,  
And a few drops of rain.

With a taper made from a ms. folded into a flute, he slyly takes a light from the fire.

I never had but one true love  
In cold earth she was lain.

He sets light to her fingers, one after the other.

A twelve month and a day being gone  
The dead began to speak.

Eyes close. Her pupils contain in each a flame.

Who is that sitting on my grave  
Who will not let me sleep?

All sleep. Her eyes go out. She sleeps.



He rearranges the macabre candelabrum so that the light from her glorious hand will fall between her legs and then he busily turns back her petticoats; the mortal candles shine. Do not think it is not love that moves him; only love moves him.

He feels no fear.

An expression of low cunning crosses his face. Taking from his back pocket a pair of enormous pliers, he now, one by one, one by one by one, extracts the sharp teeth just as the midwife did.

All silent, all still.

Yet, even as he held aloft the last fierce canine in triumph above her prostrate and insensible form in the conviction he had at last exorcised the demons from desire, his face turned ashen and sere and he was overcome with the most desolating anguish to hear the rumbling of the wheels outside. Unbidden, the coachman came; the grisly emissary of her high-born kinsman shouted imperiously: "Overture and beginners, please!" She popped the plug of spiritous linen between his lips; she swept off with a hiss of silk.

The sleepers woke and told him he was drunk; but his Virginia breathed no more!

After a breakfast of red-eye, as he was making his toilet before the mirror, he suddenly thought he would shave off his moustache in order to become a different man so that the ghosts who had persistently plagued him since his wife's death would no longer recognise him and leave him alone. But,

when he was clean-shaven, a black star rose in the mirror and he saw that his long hair and face folded in sorrow had taken on such a marked resemblance to that of his loved and lost one that he was struck like a stock or stone, with the cut-throat razor in his hand.

And, as he continued, fascinated, appalled, to stare in the reflective glass at those features that were his own and yet not his own, the bony casket of his skull began to agitate itself as if he had succumbed to a tremendous attack of the shakes.

Goodnight, sweet prince.

He was shaking like a back-cloth about to be whisked off into oblivion.

Lights! he called out.

Now he wavered; horrors! He was starting to dissolve!

Lights! more lights! he cried, like the hero of a Jacobean tragedy when the murdering begins, for the black star was engulfing him.

On cue, the laser light on the Republic blasts him.

His dust blows away on the wind.

*Angela Carter was born in London in 1940. She is one of Britain's most highly-praised novelists, author of The Magic Toyshop (1967), Heroes and Villains (1969), The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffman (1972), The Passion of New Eve (1977) and other works. She is also well-known as a critic and journalist – the forthcoming Nothing Sacred (Virago, 1982) is a collection of her best non-fiction from The Guardian, New Society and elsewhere.*



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# JOHN SLADEK

## GUESTING

“At last, a real swift Moon,” chumbles the general. He stands with his back to the room, staring out the great curved window. General Veet is not a well man; these past few days (weeks?) of interrogation have not been easy on any of us. The hands behind his back do not signal composure: the right desperately grasps the thumb of the left. If only he could cope like Nancy! But a relaxing chat with Jeb may yet help upgrade matters.

I am glad to occupy myself with this journal. Relief is mine in abling at last to set down some of my new experiences. All during the weeks (months?) of interrogation I was naturally denied access to any tools of fiction.

Such as television. It was through television that I first came to know these people, I feel sure. Long before I intruded in their planet's dust, I was privileged to watch them selling one another pizza-flavoured taco-burgers, germicidal electronics and dog sugar. Soon I am to play a modest part in all this.

I cannot remember the crash itself. Was I buzzing a radar station, as sometimes they hint? I only know that I did crash, and that I must have been thrown clear of the saucer before its total annihilation by radar. As I learned later, my survival was truly miraculous: “On any other turkey farm,” Veet said, “you’d be a dead letter.”

This farm was owned by the breeder-inventor Snell McLube, now famous but unknown a year before when he’d launched his “self-stuffing” turkeys on the Thanksgiving market. Alarmed by his audacity, certain large Western sage cartels had tried tying him up in court with various nuisance suits, while they urged the FDA to initiate carcinogenic testing. With his money running out, McLube agreed to sell his patent

to the cartel for suppression. In return, he demanded an exclusive nationwide franchise on sage pillows (the popular insomnia cure). A reluctant bargain was struck.

At the same time, McLube’s ever-fertile imagination had moved on to “Sha-ho-fun”, or rice vermicelli. He’d found a species of roundworm — a harmless parasite on his self-stuffers — that built itself termite-like tunnels of edible starch. By selective breeding, and by adding to the worm’s diet his own artificial rice flavouring, McLube found he could produce instant Sha-ho-fun in any quantity, without rice.

He began stockpiling huge “haystacks” of the vermicelli, kept dry by many layers of plastic and surplus sage pillows, as he prepared for a main assault on the vast Chinese market. It was one of these haystacks that broke my fall. The sage may also have contributed to my amnesia.

I awoke to the acrid smell of glass and nylon. There were odd sensations of motion, mechanical noises, harsh human voices gargling away just as they do on television. I opened my eyes to a screen filled with flickering white. My translator was turned on, but not adjusted to deal with the flurry of idiom:

“...try to deal relationships, you know? In a very positive, human way...finance needs enthusing...”

“With me it was God, God, God, all the way.”

“...were made out of brass, and when he clanged them together...”

“...real swift moons...”

“Kant always insisted that the physical things in space and time were real, see? Anybody who says Kant was an idealist is just fulla shit, man.”

“...a Gettysburger with lettuce and...”

I could turn my head, despite the ropes and clamps,

and see a number of humans wearing shapeless blue bags over their heads. This had to be the military. When the one driving stopped us, the puzzling white streaks became simple dots of falling snow. There was snow on the ground, too. Two of the humans descended and built a small column of snow, which I recognized as a "snowman". When they had completed it and urinated on it, we proceeded.

General Veet continues to stare out the window at the darkness of parking lots. This world has so many parking lots, so many elevators, so many cafeterias. Even television could not prepare me for the dazzle.

At first there was only interrogation, which I suppose is the same anywhere: drugs, hypnosis, beatings, painful stuff, combined with offers of food, freedom, a high school diploma...

Q: Where is your home planet?

A: I really don't know.

Q: In this galaxy?

A: What's — ?

Q: I'll ask the questions, space swine dog! Now just look at this star map and point to your home star.

A: Frankly one star looks pretty much like another to me. Sometimes I can pick out the Big Dipper the Plough the Wain Ursa Major the Great Bear. (Sometimes the translator shows off.)

Q: How does your spacecraft operate?

A: I'm no good with mechanical things. I imagine it has some kind of power or fuel or something and — ouch, don't.

And always in the dark there would be the sound of Veet's thumb cracking, cracking.

My amnesia seems total; with two exceptions we learned nothing about my previous life.

I did come up with one glimpse of myself flying along in my flying saucer. There is a potted begonia sitting on the instrument panel.

The other remembered fact is that I am skilled in hypno-surgery. Indeed, I am to demonstrate it tonight, by curing Nancy's pathological fear of seals. Phobophobia is not uncommon in military families, I find; several of the interrogation team have afflicted relatives. But I feel particular affection for Nancy Veet, as for her poor father.

This waiting room is large, fit for hundreds, but we three "tonight's guests" are its only occupants: General Beaujangles Veet, his daughter Nancy, and my true self. Only us on an ocean of orange carpet, waiting as we have waited all day for rehearsals, makeup calls, prop fittings. Television people do not, it seems, trust reality to happen only once. All must be arranged and rehearsed. Yet this Jeb Mason Show is watched by a thousand thousand thousand souls.

I have rehearsed many ways of making my entrance. An official named Lionel something — Wormcast, was it? — keeps changing everything. First he ordered me to appear wearing roller skates on my hands, and to present Jeb Mason with a silver doughnut. A joke had been written for Jeb to make.

But no, then I was to wire-fly across the stage, wearing a neon-light collar and carrying a mouthful of gold coins, which I was to spit into an upright tuba.

But no, now instead there will be a pink fur cage carried on by four men dressed as parrots; inside will

be a washing machine filled with bananas. Under cover of a simulated explosion this will be whisked out of sight on a revolving stage which also brings into view Nancy pelting me with starfish while her father sings "The Umbrella Song". I'll wear a purple leopard skin; Nancy, copper lamé. The producers feel that this is sufficiently "alien" to tell the audience that something new is happening. I see nothing new in it.

I learned that my interrogation by the military was over, in the most offhand manner. I was in my cell at the base, where the base dentist (a trusted mute) was fitting me with dentures to replace teeth lost in questioning. General Veet came in wearing, not his usual drab uniform, but a casual suit of mustard yellow. The dentist, who was also blind, was unaware of this. He supposed my startled exclamation to be a groan of pain.

Without a word, Veet handed me a freshly decoded message:

As for our neighbour's family, there were Attn relevant personnel: As of today, projects seven of them and they were drawn to be wound down include projects Alien with seven oranges, a thing quite out Soybeans to Zwieback Galore; excludable themes might of taste, no variety in life, no be nonfood color or piano scent. Color composition in the world. We desired to piercingly piano rushes through our celestial budget have something done in a brighter style... (mauve) towards ongoing "piano galore" be's unmanageable...

My wife desired to be represented as Thrawn Janet's celestial budget of puttylike attention Venus, with a stomacher richly set with grasps soybeans galore! Steamish Prussian Melba soybeans? diamonds, and her two little ones as Goose down from budgies? Putty methods: attention! Cupids by her side, while I, in blinding reports from central office ignored! Piano, my own gown and band, was to crooked band DNA down own paradoxical budget present her with my books on the Whistonian controversy. gifts from soybeans. Crooked Bacon, blind, rushes home cooking.

"A book code? But why use a long quotation from Goldsmith, if they only want to tell you to stop questioning me? It makes it all so unwieldy, like a kitchen

## NEXT ISSUE

Another varied selection of the best in new imaginative fiction, including:

\* *Myths of the Near Future*, an important new novella by J.G. Ballard.

\* *Angel Baby*, an extraordinary story of a less-than-implicate conception by Rachel Pollack.

\* *No Coward Soul*, a journey to the phantasmagoric hinterland of the psyche with Josephine Saxton.

\* and much more.

painting that..." I tried to say, but the dentist clamped a rubber mask firmly over my face and I entered the poppy fields of sleep.

I feel sleepy now, and envy Nancy her industry. When we first arrived here in the orange-carpeted room, Nancy took from her bag a small coping saw and a disc of smooth elm plywood. She has spent her time creating a portrait, delicately-pierced, of J. Edgar Hoover. The name will be picked out in those delightful little brass nails she calls *flewets*. Nancy has I think learned great patience, being both an army daughter and seal-shy.

My patience is wearing, since Lionel Wormcast came by to change things again. Now I am simply to walk in, wearing an ordinary suit. The only extra will be a bathing cap (for my poor horns).

Veet's knuckle is popping like an outboard motor.

"**T**he public has to be told, but gently," he said. "Press releases like these can ease the way a little." He showed me a sheaf of documents with headlines like *FLYING SAUCERS COULD BE MCCOY*, *EXPERTS AGREE: SPACE VISITORS FRIENDLY VEGETARIANS?*, *SPACE ALIENS 'JUST FOLKS'*; and finally *SPACEYS MAY SAVE WHALE*. "But what we're really counting on is the Jeb Mason Show. Once people see you on Jeb Mason, they know you're real. They know you happen. Anything else is just uncontrollable rumour."

"Luckily there's a slot opening up early next year. That gives us time to get ready."

"Ready."

He cracked a knuckle. "You can't go on the goddamn Jeb Mason Show and say you got amnesia. We'll fake up some stuff for you: your planet's got a purple sky and three moons, you count with a duodecimal system, you fight dragons a lot, et cetera, et cetera. We'll get historians to write you a little history, physicists to figure out how your saucers fly, linguists to make up a language."

"But I'll never learn all that!"

"Just learn highlights and fake it. You'll only be talking for five minutes, tops. You throw in a phrase like 'Relief is mine in abling to be here tonight' and they'll eat it up."

"I could never talk like that," I protested. "Maybe I should do something instead of talk. I could do some hypnosurgery, maybe cure somebody of a phobia or something."

A knuckle shot its warning. "You leave Nancy alone," he said. It was the first I'd heard of Nancy.

The technique for curing any phobia is quite simple. The sufferer is made to imagine that he or she is a loose page in a dictionary read by his mother or her father. The name of the feared object is on that page, and becomes visible as the page slips out and begins fluttering towards the fire. A salad basket intervenes (the hypnotist) and, after a feigned erasure, administers an imaginary injection of reserpine. It remains only to wedge the sufferer's legs between two grand pianos and awaken him or her. I have never known this cure to fail. Yet I feel uneasy. I wish Beaujangles and Nancy had not agreed to this.

I studied highlights of alien behaviour in any case, and I was given to opportunities to show off in secret: lunch with the President, and a private audience with the Pope.

I can't say the Presidential lunch went badly, but it

was curious. The President was seated at a large table among a dozen advisers. Though he saw me and nodded as I sat down, I do not think he knew who I was. All of his conversation seemed to be with Hal Gettysburger, his adviser on silver bullion.

The meal began with grapefruit, which I find poisonous; then green salad, which my assumed religion forbids; and finally turkey stuffed with rice vermicelli – to which I have an allergy. The President ate nothing, but drank plain water through the meal. His advisers all followed suit. As we all gave dessert a miss (tapioca, I'd heard, was derived from a poisonous root) the adviser next to me asked if I knew how tax shelters were erected on my planet. Before I could reply, the President rose and the meal was at an end.

I met the Pope at Castel Gandolfo, his summer residence; though it was January the air was summer-warm and clear enough to sit outdoors. His Holiness drowsed in a chair of Venetian glass. Its purple, red and green fire matched that of a few tiny brilliant creatures hovering about his shoulders: hummingbirds.

"They pick the wax from one's ears," he laughed, batting them away. "But they are a nuisance. Sit down, my child."

I took the plain glass chair opposite and waited. An hour or more of silence followed. I could not determine whether His Holiness was thinking, meditating or sleeping. Finally, as he got up to go, he said, "Immanuel."

"Immanuel," I murmured politely.

"Immanuel Velikovsky," came the impatient reply.

"That's the name I was trying to think of. You have read his interesting theory no doubt? He says that Earth once cracked smack into Venus, killing all the dinosaurs."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, yes, and it also parted the Red Sea for Moses."

I nodded.

"Read it, my child, read it." He prepared to give me his blessing. "You above all should be conversant with these latest scientific findings."

**L**ionel drifts in to give us the final line-up tonight: Hand-jive star Bi Wredge, who was to have given the show a visual opening, has tennis elbow, so we lead off with pitcher Don Obergass of the Connecticut Yankees; followed by Siamese twin pianists Dewey and Sherm; then comes "Father" Jasper Tunnix, an ex-priest now doing religious market research. For a change of pace, impressionist Morm Zinger will then imitate articles of clothing, before eminent faith lawyer Duck Hubb chimes in with a more serious note. We're on last, in the "ordinary folks" slot.

Scarcely has Mr Wormcast finished filling us in when the great wall-screens in our orange-bottomed cage flicker into life. "It's the JEB MASON SHOW!" comes the hysterical announcement, above an insistent riff of trumpets. "And here he is -- JEB THE MAN!"

The laconic pitcher Don Obergass opens the show badly, speaking briefly of a hobby, ant-crucifixion, before making way for the twins. Joined from head to pelvis along their common spine, they sit on one bench to two pianos, to play a few bars of Hahne-mann's *Die Organon* before the commercial. Nancy drops her coping saw, and when she picks it up, I

notice that her hand is trembling. The sight of two pianos? J. Edgar is beginning to look ragged, unkempt.

Father Tunxis describes a home computer, available to shut-ins, which is capable of saying 10<sup>14</sup> rosaries a minute. I try to remember my duodecimal multiplication tables, my mind is a blur if that is possible, I can't remember the details of the saucer engine, something to do with piping the strangeness from quark to quark in a field of anti-nothingness? I watch the piles of sawdust beneath Nancy's chair deepen; the features of Hoover go from unkempt to leprous.

A commercial melody: hair sugar, cat soap, frozen charcoal are hawked before Duck Hubb appears:

"Well you see, Jeb, faith law is just another approach to law. We feel orthodox lawyers are all right as far as they go, but sometimes they don't really reach the client. They treat the client like a batch of paper, you know? The client's not a person, he or she is just a 'case', you know? This one is a divorce, maybe, and that one is a breach of contract, and over there is a libel. But people aren't just cases, they're human beings. We faith lawyers try to treat the whole client, yeah? Myself, I try to find out what the client really needs and wants. Instead of picking around in dusty lawbooks or manufacturing paperwork full of whereases and parties of the first part, I just sit down with my client and we ask God to look up the precedents for us. I put my hand on the client's head and try to feel where the trouble is. And do you know, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, we go to court and we win! We win! Because, you know, God is the real party of the first part, right?"

Tremendous applause cut off at its peak for a commercial. Lionel Wormcast comes into the lounge holding up his clipboard defensively. He's hardly able to look at us as he delivers the bad news:

"Look kids, I'm real sorry, but we had this last-minute change. See, we were negotiating with Leon Earl Poge, only there were all these loose ends. We weren't sure he'd be out of jail today, and the company that manages him wanted a little more money than we felt he was really worth — but I'm glad to say we made the deal five minutes ago. So you're bumped, real sorry. Of course we'll pencil you in for a slot later in the year. But speaking personally I guess you don't have much of a chance there either; things like an alien from space don't have a long shelf life..."

The face of J. Edgar Hoover was by this time entirely dissolved in elm sawdust. Nancy let the meaningless plywood ring fall to the carpet. "Oh I've made such a mess. I'll get something and clear it up," she says, sighing.

General Veet turns from the window at last. "Leon Earl Poge? You're dumping us for Leon Earl Poge? A four-star general, a genuine extraterrestrial alien from the other side of the galaxy or somewhere, and a big-production hypno-surgical cure — I don't believe this, you want to throw all that away for one lousy mass murderer? Goddamnit, Lionel, you can have a mass murderer anytime, anytime!"

Lionel nods in sympathetic circles. "Kids, if the decision was up to me... But this Poge is quite a character, you know? I mean, to murder twenty-eight people in a supermarket, and then to serve only one week of your sentence before they have to let you out on a technicality, you have to be quite a character."

His indulgent chuckle goads Veet on to more undignified pleading. "What about this?" he cries, and strips off my bathing cap. The emissile horns, pressed flat for hours, shoot out to their full length. My headache eases. "He's got antennae, dammit, how's that for character?"

Lionel shrugs. "They look like snail horns to me. Kind of dumb and slow. I mean no disrespect to your geek here, but why don't he go to a good plastic surgeon and have them cut off? They're no good to us, we ain't running a freak show, kids."

On the giant screens, Leon Earl Poge was still an insignificant figure in a brimless hat. "I'm sorry I done it," he was saying. "But yeah, I guess I would do it again."

"Where's Nancy?" I said, suddenly alarmed.

For some time I haven't abling to make any more entries in this journal. My life seems to have gone adrift. Everything flowed so fast through the Bernoulli tube of the Jeb Mason Show, but slower before and after. Now I lack either the viscosity to take hold of life as I find it or the pressure to push on past to something new. My life-flow is at times laminar, at times turbulent, with occasional cavitations like the death of Nancy.

General Veet blames me for everything, naturally: His career is in tatters, we did not get on the Jeb Mason Show, his daughter is dead and finally he has just learned he has a tumour of the left thumb. Yet tragedy has strangely brought us closer together, even if he does plan to kill me.

I recently had my horns removed by a Minneapolis cosmetic surgeon who chattered all through the operation about his favourite cartoon characters, a lion that does comic belches and others. In the waiting room I ran into Don Obergass, there to have a few more sweat-glands removed from an already dry and deadly pitching palm. Afterwards we took a captive balloon to the overhead shopping mall and exchanged news. Don toyed with the idea of giving up pitching to devote more time to ant-crucifixion.

"It's a painless process, you know? The ants really enjoy it."

"Come on babe, that's what fox-killers say about their prey."

"True though...how can I explain? One day in the dugout I was watching this anthill. And I noticed how much like a miniature Passion Play it all looked, you know? The orderly processions, the sense of something large and important taking place..."

My anaesthetic had evidently not worn off; I kept dozing as we ascended.

"Getting the little buggers to carry a cross was the easy part. Call me crazy but I've always seen...pitcher as...st-fig...the mound as Calvary? The cleats become nails, the rosin bag is vinegar and gall, the ball a pierced...where on the cap it says I.N....the umpire a centurion, runners on first and third are the good thieves, you with me so far? Judas is up with two out in the bottom half of the ninth, no score and the crowd..."

"Wants Barabbas, he's in the bullpen," I interjected. "Oh don't be stupid. Weren't you listening?"

I explained that I had a lot on my mind, and described the death of Nancy. The climax of our televised cure would have been a demonstration that Nancy's

phocophobia was indeed gone. For this purpose, a live seal in a tank had been brought into the studio. While searching for a broom to sweep up her elm sawdust, Nancy had blundered into the wrong room, to face the most feared object in the universe.

"Which turned out not to be you, poor thing," said Don. "Have you thought of trying ant-crucifixion?"

I said I couldn't help wondering why Don, a beautiful and intelligent woman and a successful ballplayer, indulged in this strange and destructive hobby.

She laughed. "That's what Morm says."

"Morm?"

"Morm Zinger, my husband. We met on the Jeb Mason Show - remember his impersonation of a broken tennis shoe? - and he calls me crazy! And here he is now, hi Morm."

The impressionist was just emerging from an elm store with a number of plywood discs under his arm. "Just something to take my mind off my researches," he apologized. It turns out that Zinger is tracing references in modern literature to brand names of clothing.

"There's a peculiar pattern emerging. For instance in Ulysses, at the funeral a man in a mackintosh turns up. No one knows him, and by mistake his name gets

into the paper as M'Intosh. A man in the crowd.

"And again in *The Waste Land*, again in the burial part, another man in the crowd, someone knows him as 'Stetson'."

"Burial, man in crowd, clothing label," I said. "But where does it get us?"

"I'm not sure. It's as though a fully-clothed figure of mystery is trying to emerge through modern Western literature. Maybe these are mystical references to a new Messiah. I am still trying to run down a few promising leads, references to Levis, Hush Puppies and *The Bishop's Jaegers*." His manner is urgent, as though he believes I have some answer.

Don says, "Darling, did you remember the little elm crosses?" There is urgency in her tone too, and in the sound behind me of a gun being cocked or maybe a thumb knuckle being cracked.

**John Sladek** was born in Iowa in 1937. He came to England in 1966 and was a leading contributor to *New Worlds* for several years. His SF novels are *The Reproductive System* (1968), *The Muller-Fokker Effect* (1970) and *Roderick* (1980), although he has also written detective novels and a hilarious non-fiction work, *The New Apocrypha* (1973). His latest novel is *Roderick at Random* (Granada, 1982).



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# THE BROTHEL IN ROSENSTRASSE

## MICHAEL MOORCOCK

**T**he brothel in Rosenstrasse has the ambience of an integrated nation, hermetic, microcosmic. It is easy, once within, to believe the place possessed of an infinity of rooms and passages, all isolated from that other world outside. Doubtless Frau Schmetterling creates this impression deliberately, with detailed thoroughness. Reminded of childhood security and delicious mystery the explorer discovers his cares disappearing, together with any adult lessons of morality or self-restraint. Here he may not only fulfil his desires, but he need feel no guilt or concern for doing so: the brothel can be departed from and visited again at will. Money is all he needs. Here there are anodynes for any kind of wound, there are no sharp voices, no pointing fingers, no complicated emotional involvements. Here a man (and occasionally a woman) may feel himself to be what he most wishes to be. Nietzsche's socially destructive admonitions can be safely followed in this enclosure. The ego is allowed full rein. Yet publicly everyone is discreetly polite and compliant; bad manners are frowned upon and must never be displayed in the salon. A maternal and firm-minded woman, neat and plump, Frau Schmetterling runs her brothel with the skill of the captain of a luxury ship. Most of her working day is spent in her head-quarters, her elaborately-equipped kitchen. This is territory generally forbidden to clients but is a haven for her charges. The kitchen is where Frau Schmetterling interviews new girls and where every day she discusses menus with Ulric, her huge cook. Through the barred windows of the kitchen is her garden which she cares for almost as jealously as her china, though she allows 'Mister' to do some of the work. 'Mister' is the enfeebled, grey-haired gentleman with the face of a boy whom she will sometimes describe as her 'protector'. He lives at the top of the house and dotes on her, showing temper only if he feels she has been threatened or insulted. In the brothel he supervises the cleanliness of the rooms; he frequently goes shopping for the girls; he makes sure that fresh flowers are permanently in evidence, that the paint of the shutters and door is impeccable.

Frau Schmetterling is Jewish. Nobody knows her real name. She is well-educated. She is fastidious in her habits, always wearing simple but beautifully-cut old-fashioned dresses trimmed with lace, and treats 'Mister' with affectionate formality, a queen to her consort. Their mutual respect for each other is touching. Because of her tendency to plumpness, her com-

fortable homeliness, it is difficult to guess her age, but I believe she must be close to fifty. She speaks several languages very well, and her native tongue seems to be a Russian dialect, suggesting that she was born in Byelorussia or perhaps Poland. "My girls," she says, "are ladies. I expect them to behave accordingly and to be properly treated. In private with a client they may choose to be whatever they and the client wish them to be but at all other times they must behave with tact and discretion." The girls, whether on duty or off, are perfectly costumed. Clients are expected to wear evening dress. I myself am clothed as carefully as if I were attending a formal dinner at the Embassy. Alexandra has on rose silk and a deep green cape. I open the blue door for her and follow her in. Our first impression is of subtle perfume, dark polished wood, mirrors and rust-coloured drapery. The room is lit by a single ornamental lamp. From another part of the brothel comes the faint sound of barking. Everywhere is luxury. Everything is soft or heavy or dark and the young woman who waits on the coverlet of the four-poster seems small and delicate in contrast. She is apparently relaxed and rather delighted by the adventure. "M'sieu." She rises and walks up to Alexandra, kissing her prettily on both cheeks. "Are you French?" I ask. I go from habit to the sideboard and pour absinthe for all three of us. The lady shrugs as if to say that it is for me to decide her nationality. "What's your name, mademoiselle?" "It is Thérèse." She has a Berlin accent. Her attention is on Alexandra. "You are very pretty. And young!"

"This is Alexandra."

Thérèse is about twenty, with straight black hair drawn back from her oval face. She has light blue eyes. Her skin is pink and her hands are long. In her white undergarments, which are trimmed with peach-coloured lace, her figure is fuller than Alexandra's and tends to puppy-fat. She has a large nose, prominent red lips and a self-contained way of holding herself. She has small pointed breasts. I stipulated the colouring of the girl and the size of her breasts in my note to Frau Schmetterling. In this familiar ambience I become relaxed and my mood seems to be transmitting itself to Alexandra, who remains, however, a trifle ill-at-ease and begins to move around the room looking at pictures and ornaments. Thérèse hides her amusement. All three shadows are thrown onto the large autumnal flowers of the wall-paper. Alexandra is a little taller than Thérèse. Old Papadakis is scowling at me. "What is it?" I ask him. "You should let me fetch the doctor,"

he says. "You are not in your right mind. You are weak. You should rest. You are overtaxing yourself." Is he trying to persuade me to dependency upon him? He cannot be genuinely concerned. I do not employ him for that. "Go to the village," I tell him. "Get me something with cocaine in it."

He mutters in Greek.

"The doctor will give me morphine," I say. "It will dull my brain. I need my wits. Can't you see I'm doing something worthwhile again?" I hold up the pages. "These are my memoirs. You are mentioned in them. You should be pleased." He comes forward as if to see what I have written. I close the cover. "Not yet. They will be published when I am dead. Perhaps when you are dead, too." Thérèse says to Alexandra: "Is this the first time you have been here?"

"Yes," says Alexandra. "And you? How long have you worked here?"

"Two years this Christmas," says Thérèse. "I was an artists' model in Prague, for paintings as well as photographs. Will this be your first time?"

"With a lady?" says Alexandra. The rose silk hisses. "No. In a brothel, yes."

"And your first time with both a lady and a gentleman," I remind her gently.

"Yes."

An encouraging smile from Thérèse: "You will like it. It is my favourite thing. You mustn't be afraid."

"I'm not afraid," says Alexandra removing her cape. She stares hard at Thérèse. "I am looking forward to it. The surroundings are new to me, that's all." She keeps her distance from Thérèse who makes a kind-hearted effort to be pleasant to her. In the past it was Alexandra who took the initiative with her schoolfriends. "What are you receiving for your services?" she asks suddenly. Thérèse is surprised, answering mildly. "M'sieu has made the usual arrangement with Frau Schmetterling. I think."

"Thérèse is on a fixed weekly income," I say. "It is one of the benefits Frau Schmetterling offers to those who want to work here. It is a form of security. Part of the money is paid directly. Part is kept in a savings account."

"You're looked after well, then," says Alexandra. "Safer than marriage, even."

"Far safer," says Thérèse. She continues to assume that Alexandra is shy. "Your dress is lovely. Levantine silk, isn't it?"

"Thank you." Suddenly Alexandra puts down her glass and crosses to Thérèse, embracing her and kissing her full on the mouth. Thérèse is a little taken aback. Alexandra grins. "You're lovely, too. You're exactly my type, did you know? Did Ricky ask for you specially?" Thérèse begins to relax, as if she now has a notion of what is expected of her. She makes no further attempts to put Alexandra at her ease. "I'm glad I appeal to you." There is a touch of irony, a swift glance towards me, but I refuse a part. "I've always longed to meet a real whore," murmurs Alexandra, stroking Thérèse's hair. She puts an arm around the girl's shoulders and leads her to the sideboard. "Pour us another drink, Ricky. I want you to make love to Thérèse first." Her tone implores but her stance commands. "I'll wait here." She indicates a gilded chair padded with brown velvet. She has the manner of a determined little girl setting out the rules of a dolls'

game. Not for the first time I find this aspect of her character faintly disconcerting. She seems almost prim. As I finish my drink Thérèse begins to remove her chemise, her pantaloons, her cherry-coloured stockings. I feel some trepidation, not for the action I am about to take but for the spirit in which I shall commit myself to the performance. Alexandra has discovered a closet. I remove my jacket and hand it to her. I remove my waistcoat, my tie and my shirt. All are neatly stowed by Alexandra. I lower my trousers and these she folds. I take off my socks, my underpants. Alexandra steps back from me and I turn towards the bed. Thérèse is also naked, with her hair loosened and her head propped against the pillows. She has become professional; her pink body waits for me. Her lips are slightly parted, her eyes hooded. There is no apparent difference between her artful desire and Alexandra's blind passion. If I was not aware that Thérèse was a whore I would believe that she yearned for me alone. Her youthful skin might never have known a man's touch. Do all women slide so indiscriminately into lust? How are they taught such things? I kiss Thérèse's cheeks, her neck. She moans. I kiss her soft shoulders, her breasts, her stomach. She shudders. Her calf presses against my penis. I kiss her face again. Her tongue is hot on my neck, her hand finds my penis and testicles and fondles them. I hear silk behind me, but I do not turn. I press my fingers into Thérèse's cunt. It is already wet. I push her legs apart and she draws me into her. Her body is more generous than Alexandra's, but Thérèse cannot reproduce that thrilling urgency, that desperation of movement which removes us entirely from the world of ordinary perception. Thérèse thrusts back at me with skilled strength; my orgasm when it comes is thin and quickly dissipates. Alexandra kneels beside us on the bed, still fully clothed. She strokes my rump with hesitant fingers. Perhaps it is her inexperience which binds me to her, why I am so willing to help her discover novelty after novelty so that she will forever be encountering something which is fresh to her. Will I continue to love her when all sexual experience is familiar to her? And what are her motives in this? What does she really want from me, save companionship in her adventure? She says that she loves me, but she is too young for the words to have any substance. She is fascinated by my reputation, which like most reputations of the sort is greatly exaggerated: I have probably been rejected by as many women as I have conquered and for every one who has believed me an inspired lover I have had others whom I have failed to satisfy. The needs of the body are actually as subtle as the needs of the personality. She is kissing Thérèse even as she strokes me. The feel of her dress on my skin is delightful. She touches Thérèse's nipples, again with that sweet hesitation. She lies across my back, slowly moving her groin against me. Thérèse strokes her wrist. Their perfume almost drugs me. I am passive between them as their passion increases. Alexandra lets Thérèse begin to unbutton her dress. Eventually both naked bodies press on mine and gradually grow more confident with each other. A breast brushes my shoulder; a knee leans on my thigh. Lying face down in the bed I find it almost impossible to tell which little body is which. The sensation is wonderful as their ardour grows; the moans and grunts become sighs and

gasps; they touch, they stroke, they scratch, wonderfully oblivious of me as anything more than a body. I slip my hand down to my cock and begin to masturbate as their movements grow more urgent. Papadakis says: "You haven't enough light in here." He pulls back the curtains. There is a glimpse of distant blue, the sea. I can hear it quite clearly today and it does not irritate me. The sun seems mild and warm. "What's today?" I ask him. "The first of May," he says. "You might be able to go outside soon." I become suspicious of him, protective of my manuscript. I put it under the pillow when I sleep. He must not see it, at least until it is finished.

Papadakis brings me a cup of tea. "And will you eat something now?" he asks. "Perhaps some Camembert," I tell him. "And something blue and soft. Something tasty. What have we?" He strokes at his beard with his finger and thumb. "There's a little Cambozola. You used to enjoy that." I nod at him. "Excellent. And a glass of red wine." He purses his lips. "Wine? It will kill you!" I put down my pen. "I am better now. Can't you see that? Some red wine." He shakes his head. He is becoming surly again. "Not according to the doctor. But I will bring it if you want it." He leaves. Alexandra, Thérèse and I dine off smoked salmon and cold duck in our room. The two girls manufacture secrets and I pretend to be intrigued, to please them. Later we shall make love again, playing games with considerable zest and good humour. Then, at about three in the morning, Alexandra and I will order a cab and leave the brothel, promising to see Thérèse the next evening.

Papadakis takes the limousine to town. He likes, I know, to pretend that it is his because it gives him stature with the local peasants. Papadakis says he understands peasants and how they think. He hates them, he says. But his information about them is useful to me and gives me a greater knowledge of his attitudes. He is supposed to get me some patent medicine containing a stimulant but he will quite likely forget; most of the time he thinks only of himself, living in a dream of an unsatisfactory past and an unattainable future. Sometimes across his face comes the enthusiastic expression of a boy, a memory of his former charm. Pyat, the famous confidence trickster, had a similar appearance when I met him at Cassis with Stavisky in the mid-twenties. I have told him it is his duty to care for me when I am ill. He will sometimes reply it is the doctor's job. He was hired, after all, to be my secretary. The fact was I took pity on him. I offered him his last chance and he accepted it. Now he wriggles to be free, but there is nowhere for him to go. And he brings me my soup and fish and he changes my linen when the old woman is too drunk to do it. The pain has come back in my groin. Is Alexandra a mirror? Is the ugliness I believe I detect in her simply a reflection of my own? Since I was sixteen women have told me that I must change. I have always said to them that I am too old to change. If they do not like me as I am then they have the right to find someone they prefer. But I think I am changing for Alexandra and that is perhaps why I am occasionally frightened. I tell everyone that I am in love with feminine beauty in all its aspects. The fact is I become bored in the company of women who have no sexual presence, no matter how intelligent they may be. I think I dislike such women because their condition indicates their

own fear of themselves and consequently of the world around them. I have known many women who express the same impatience with non-sexual men. Sexuality is the key to personality. She undresses. She removes the rose silk frock, the delicate chemise; she rolls down her stockings and puts them carefully on the back of the chair. She has a habit of slipping her garters over her wrist while she removes the rest of her underwear, then, holding them in her right hand, she will go into the bathroom and set them on the ledge in front of the mirror. If they are a pair she particularly cares for she will give them a little parting kiss. I say it is too late to bathe, we should go to sleep at once, but she insists. While she is in the bath I fall asleep. I awake briefly at dawn. My blood has quickened. I begin to anticipate what we shall do together later. I turn, thinking she is still bathing, but she is fast asleep with her back to me, the sheets pulled tightly about her as if she fears something. Can she fear me? Will she come to resent me? Asleep, with her face in repose, she sometimes resembles a baby. At other times, when she is snoring and her mouth is open she reminds me of a dead rodent. I wonder if that is really all she is when she is not responding to me: a tiny unimportant predator. But when she wakes her eyes destroy my prejudice. Did her eyes always possess that strange, heated glaze? I remember how she had seemed so innocent when we first met. The prospect of making love to a virgin had driven all caution away within a few minutes. Then, I think, the expression had been there, but hidden. She had only glanced at me directly once and her eyes had told me of her desire for me. Is she a natural predator? She says she loves me, but that is meaningless. She loves what she thinks I must be, what she thinks I possess, and she lusts after my cock. She is doubtless surprised, also, that she can achieve control over others through her sexuality. Unless she is an unusual female she will continue to use her sex as her only certain means to power. She will have no notion of any other way to get what she will want for herself. Even if other ways are described to her she will not quite understand what is said, for her chief experience will have been of sexual control coupled, perhaps, with certain practical services given to the one who desires her. Her will to power, which she has in common with everyone, if satisfied only through sex could ultimately leave her empty of feeling and therefore could destroy any ordinary capacity to know desire, causing her to pass from lover to lover in a perpetual cycle of lust to dissatisfaction. As I fall back to sleep I wonder if I have created a whore. More likely, I think with grim amusement, a monster which will turn on me and take my soul. I do not believe I possess the character of a natural whore-master. I am not strong enough to control her. And this is the knowledge which sometimes excites me and brings flagging senses back to peak again. These are the thoughts of my infrequent solitude. When she is awake I scarcely think at all but remain perpetually fascinated, perpetually on guard, like the tamer with his tigress. We breakfast late in the sitting room. She pours coffee for us both. The light is pale, slanting into our windows from misty skies. The air is cooler today. She sits in her maroon dressing gown, wonderfully composed, seeming thoroughly rested. She makes no reference to the previous night's adventure. Indeed, she seems healthier, younger, more

cheerful, than she has seemed for some while. I compliment her on her good humour and her freshness as I light a cigarette. "I have never felt more alive in all my days!" she says. "My body is waking up. It never stops now. It wakes and wakes and wakes." Her smile is spontaneous and beautiful. She says: "Are you looking forward to this evening?" I am surprised. "Yes." I expected her to have doubts. She sits back in her chair in a posture of contentment. She looks towards the window. "Isn't it wonderful outside?" I smoke my cigarette and stare carefully at her. Her courage, I believe, is the courage of ignorance. But whatever its nature it transmits itself to me. "You enjoyed Thérèse?" I ask.

"Well enough," she says. "I have had better. Younger and without any experience. I think I should like a different girl after this evening. There are things Thérèse told me. Girls with special skills, apparently." I nod: "Oh, yes." She takes my hand and kisses it. "Could any woman possess a finer teacher? I want to experience everything you have experienced. I want us to be together when we discover new things." I love the softness of her lips on my wrist, the way her slender body curves in the gown. "There could be experiences you will not enjoy," I tell her. "Of course," she says. "But then I will know what they are." I laugh. "You are too fond of the novels of Huysmanns and de Goncourt. The critics are right about them. They have a pernicious influence!" I am, in my fashion, expressing my hesitation. This is the moment when I could call a halt to the adventure. But of course my curiosity overwhelms me. I acquiesce. She becomes suddenly active and begins to clothe herself. We take a drive in the afternoon, she in her cream frock trimmed with *Brodrie Anglaise* and a hat with a thick veil, I in my tweeds. I shade my face with a wide-brimmed hat. After a little while I begin to notice that the tempo of Mirenburg is subtly different. There are many more soldiers in the streets today. Carriages hurry past us on their way to the station. An unusual number of people are leaving the city. I tell our driver to stop in *Falners-allee* and send him to buy a paper from one of the kiosks. He says: "It is the war, your honour. The Civil War. Hadn't you heard?" Alexandra looks with some impatience at the newspaper as if at a passing rival. Count Holzhammer has half the country on his side, including a good proportion of the Army. He has issued a proclamation demanding the abdication of Prince Bادهoff-Krasny and the dissolution of Parliament. He argues that the new Armaments Bill will ruin Wäldenstein. He claims the Prince has deliberately set himself against the will of the majority of the people and that he is in the power of a handful of alien industrialists. Count Holzhammer is financed with Austrian money, of course, and his ranks are swelled by Bulgarian cavalry and artillery loaned by Austria but calling themselves Volunteers. The newspaper wonders if the Germans will now send aid to the Prince. So far there has been no response from Berlin. Count Holzhammer has his headquarters in an armoured train. His forces have won a battle at Brondstein. The loyalists have regrouped near Mirenburg. Count Holzhammer awaits a response to his demands. His train is some seventy miles down the line, at Slitzern. The paper believes the Prince will refuse the Count's demands. Mirenburg has never been taken by siege, says the editorial, in all its long history. During the

Thirty Years War she successfully withstood five separate attacks. She remains impregnable. Count Holzhammer must know this and is therefore almost certainly bluffing. There is a likelihood that the Prince will order Parliament to scrap the Armaments Bill and make one or two concessions to the great landowners who are giving Holzhammer their backing. I shrug and hand the paper to Alexandra. The whole business has a comic opera aspect to it and I cannot take it seriously. It is a storm in a tea-cup I tell her. A full-scale Civil War is in nobody's interest. The matter is bound to be settled by negotiation.

We drive to the hotel. The manager, an anxious beaver, approaches me, seeing the new luggage being taken up by the porters. He would be obliged if I could tell him if I intend to leave the hotel in the morning. I shake my head. "I have every intention of staying for some time." He is relieved. Apparently most of his residents will have departed by tomorrow. "They are running special trains to Danzig," he explains. He has the distracted look of a man who fears ruin. "Surely they are being over-cautious," I say. "Even if the Count takes control it will scarcely effect your guests. They are all foreigners. This squabble will be resolved in a few days and everything will be back to normal." His estimation, he agrees, is much the same as mine. "But there is a panic. Half our business people are leaving for Berlin and Paris. The Stock Market is chaotic. Exchange rates are fluctuating. Such things bother them, you know. Many visitors are returning to their firms. And Count Holzhammer is very direct about his hatred of industrialists, particularly the Jews and the Germans. They have a right to be nervous, I think." I suggest they will all come creeping back within a week. "What can they do to Mirenburg? Who would threaten her beauty with cannon-shells? It is impossible." The manager laughs. He seems relieved by my reassurance. I order a pot of tea and some pastries to be sent to our rooms. We take the lift to the third floor.

We dress ourselves carefully. Alexandra wears her flowing red evening gown and has over it a full cape of dark brown velvet. The streets are almost deserted as we make our way in a cab to *Rosenstrasse*. Here and there are groups of silent soldiers, standing guard over nothing. Groups of urchins run about pretending to shoot at one another. There are unexpected echoes to make the twilight eerie. The brothel, when we arrive, seems like a haven of normality. Thérèse awaits us behind the blue door and we again enjoy, with increasing assurance and relish, our pleasures of the previous night. As we rest, Thérèse is more talkative. She speaks enthusiastically of *Frau Schmetterling* and the establishment. She expresses her affections, her jealousies, her dislike of certain other girls. Alexandra has assumed the role of her confidante, greedy for every bit of information. We smoke a little opium. Thérèse repeats a great deal of what I have already told Alexandra, about the special rooms, the preferences of some clients (who according to the brothel's protocol she cannot name) and the predilections of the girls, the attitudes they have to their work, their clients, themselves. Growing bored with this I take Alexandra almost by force, deliberately humiliating her in front of Thérèse, then I make Thérèse kneel and accept my cock, wet with Alexandra's juices, in her



mouth while Alexandra licks my anus. I come in a convulsion of release that has little actual pleasure in it, forcing Thérèse to swallow my semen. Alexandra stops her activities but I order her to continue, telling Thérèse to fetch one of her ivory dildoes from the drawer. Then I hand the dildo to Alexandra. Together they take turns bugging me while I sob in pain and helpless terror until I am so weak they can turn me any way they please, teasing me, making me shudder. Thérèse lies with her vagina rubbing against my face while her lips nip at my cock, bringing it to life again. Alexandra joins her, fondling my balls and then squeezing them hard to inflict greater agony. They are taking their revenge on me. Slowly they bring me to the point of orgasm and then, with deliberate cruelty, they begin to kiss one another, ignoring me completely. I put my hand to my cock. Alexandra sees my movement from the corner of her eye and forces my hand back while she pushes herself against Thérèse's thigh. I do not possess the strength to take either of them and yet my frustration continues to build. Again I am turned over. Again the dildo is rammed into my anus and left there. Thérèse rests her head on my buttocks while Alexandra sits over her leaning her hands on my back and scratching at my flesh, letting Thérèse lick her clitoris until she achieves an orgasm which makes her scream and rip at my skin. My body begins to vibrate and it is as if the shock of Alexandra's orgasm has transmitted itself to Thérèse and myself. We are all shaking, almost as if we experience petit mal. I turn and tug weakly at Thérèse's hair, drawing her up towards me. Still shaking I enter her and we tremble together, making virtually no movement, letting our bodies shake us to orgasm. This time Thérèse comes first, her vulva contracting and distending rapidly and I am yelling, feeling Alexandra's hand slapping again and again at my bottom, at Thérèse's thighs, as she laughs in high-pitched harmony with our noises. I become suddenly blank. I have passed out for a few seconds. When I awake Thérèse and Alexandra are lying one on each side of me, cuddled in my arms like two tranquil puppies. Alexandra has her mouth open and is snoring. She looks, as she often does, like a replete rat and I turn my attention first to her youthful flesh, then to Thérèse who, in sleep, seems slightly puzzled, just a trifle worried by something, and yet her lips are innocently curved in a smile. Alexandra opens alarmed, accusatory eyes, then composes her features in a way I have only seen on a much older woman. I lean down to embrace her. Thérèse grunts and stirs but does not wake up. "I think we should go," I say. "Are you satisfied?"

"With Thérèse?" She frowns. "Oh, yes. But we'll come again tomorrow, shall we? For a different lady?" I am indulgent. "You don't think we should rest, be by ourselves, at least until Friday or Saturday?" She is displeased. "But it is getting so exciting. Are you bored already?" I shake my head. "Not bored. Merely patient."

She puts her feet to the floor and looks at herself in the mirror. "What's wrong?" I reassure her and, of course, within moments am promising her that we shall return tomorrow, that I will speak to Frau Schmetterling before we leave. I would do anything to preserve this dream and will avoid, if I can, any hint of conflict between us. "You are a wonderful, wonderful friend." Naked, she raises herself to put her arms

around my neck. "I adore you. I love you so much, Ricky." I kiss her violently on the mouth and then pull away from her, attempting gaiety. "Get dressed. We must slip into the night." Sadness and distress have invaded me so swiftly that I am angry, as if faced with a physical enemy. Much as I control myself she notices. When she is ready for the street she says quietly, "Have I upset you?" I deny it, of course. She becomes tactful. "Perhaps you're tired of our adventure? Perhaps we should rest tomorrow, after all." But I am by now fierce in my insistence that we continue. "You're certain you want to?" she says. "Of course," I reply. The anger fades. She appears to be mollified. I, in turn, become astonished at how easily she can be reassured. But she is a child. It is only experience which encourages us to pursue our suspicions; that and the memory of past pain. She has not known pain. Only boredom. In a woman of my own age I should sense an echo, some form of sympathy. But with Alexandra there is no sympathy. And I continue to conspire in her ignorance because it is the child I love. If she were to become a woman I should lose interest in her in a matter of weeks at the most. We persist in a conspiracy in which I alone am guilty, for I know what I am denying her. I refuse my own reason. I refuse to consider any sense of consequence. She is what I want. I will not have her change. And yet I have no real power in the matter. I can only pray the moments will last as long as possible for it will be Alexandra, in the end, who will make the decision either to stop dreaming or, more likely, substitute one dream for another. I look carefully at Papadakis's sallow, bearded face. At the deep hollows under his morbid eyes whose melancholy is emphasised by the spectacles he affects. Even the grey streaks in his beard have an unhealthy look, as if a saprophytic plant invades it. He turns away from my stare to pick at something with a quiet, fussy movement. I have made him self-conscious. I enjoy my moment. "You should take more exercise," I say. He grunts and shifts towards the shadows: a need to hide. His shoulders seem to become more stooped than usual. I am driving him into the darkness where he feels safest. "Have you been looking for the evidence again?" I ask. "I have told you, the photographs are not in the house." He pushes back the heavy green curtain which covers the door of my bedroom. He disappears behind it. I pause to refill my pen. Alexandra is petulant. Her full lips turn downward and she pulls a hand through wet hair. Her skin seems to have lost its lustre. Her shoulders and her breasts in particular have a lifeless look: a wax statue. "You are eating too much custard," I call after Papadakis. "Too much bread and jam!" Alexandra pulls herself together, evidently displeased with her own mood. I hand her a glass of champagne. She accepts it; she is placatory — "Could we find some opium. My nerves. Or some cocaine?" I shrug. "Are you afraid? Do you want to go home?" I am still sluggish and am not properly awake. She shakes her head. "Of course not. But with all this news, not knowing who is doing what or where my parents are and so on —"

There is a knock. Frau Schmetterling is apologetic. "I'm glad I haven't interrupted you. I thought you'd be leaving. I wanted to speak to you, Ricky." Alexandra is alarmed, like a schoolgirl caught smoking. "Good evening, my dear." I have never known Frau Schmetterling to visit one of the rooms before. She is



stately, as ever, in black and white, but seems agitated. "Would you excuse me while I have a word with your gentleman? Ricky?" We move out into the passage. "This is not the best time," she says, "but I have decided to go to bed early. It has been too busy for a weekday. We were not really prepared. Poor Mister can hardly stand up. Ulric has threatened to leave. It is the War. The thought of death is a great encourager of lust. I would like to invite you to stay here, in one of the private suites, if you would feel better. I am keeping it aside for you. Until the business with Holzhammer is over. I have heard rumours. Well, as you'd expect. No truce has been reached and Holzhammer... He means to win, I gather, at any price. The city could suffer. You know how fond I am of you. Your hotel is so near the centre. Here, we are more secluded. Well?" Her dark, maternal eyes are earnest.

I am moved by her concern. "You have always been so kind," I say, touching her arm. "I'm comfortable enough at the Liverpool, at least for the moment. There is also the young lady to consider."

"If you could promise me there would be no scandal I'd willingly extend the invitation. The Prince intends to defend — Oh, Ricky — Simply reassure me." She seems doubtful, reluctant to have Alexandra as a guest. Her little fat face is full of worry.

"There would be no scandal, I promise." But I am lying, of course. If Alexandra's parents were to find out where their daughter was it would be the end of Frau Schmetterling's business in Mirenburg. For that reason I am firm in declining her offer. "What danger can there be to civilians, even if Holzhammer marches in tomorrow? Mirenburg is not Paris. There is no Commune here!"

"The Prince means to resist," she says again.

"Then Germany will come to help him and Holzhammer will be trounced once and for all."

"The guns..." she murmurs. "They say..."

"Holzhammer will not bombard Mirenburg. He would arouse the hatred of the civilised world."

Frau Schmetterling is unconvinced.

"I am a little exhausted," I tell her gently. "I desire very much, madame, to get to bed."

"Of course." She squeezes my hand. "But you must remember, Ricky, that I am your friend." She waddles away down the passage, then pauses. "I care for your well-being, my dear." She waves her plump arms as if to dismiss her own sentiments. She lets out a matronly chuckle. "Good night, Ricky."

Our carriage is loud in the expectant streets; Alexandra wants to know the substance of my conversation with the Madam. I tell her. "But it would be so convenient," she says. "Why didn't you accept?" My instincts are against it. I can hardly explain my feelings to myself and I am already tiring. My nerves are bad, my body no longer sings. I desperately want the comfort of the Liverpool's sheets. Alexandra is still euphoric. She kisses and hugs me. I am her master, she says, her beautiful man, the most wonderful lover in the world. Horses race by with soldiers on their backs. I see lamps moving, hear the occasional voice and I wonder how much of the tension I sense is external, how much comes from within. Alexandra clings to me, kisses me with soft, little girl kisses. It is all I can do at this moment not to shudder. My impulse is to leave them both, girl and city, and dash for the

bland security of Berlin. Then Alexandra's hand is on my cock and I am helpless. The direction of my life is to be set forever. Nothing of me that is positive will survive Mirenburg.

We tug off our clothes as soon as we are in our room. Alexandra crawls in to bed beside me. I take her tenderly in my arms. She is almost immediately asleep, her face in the pillows. It is as if she lies just below the surface of freedom: head down in an unsecured coffin from which, if she merely turns her body once, she can immediately escape. I dim the lamp but do not extinguish it. The sky outside becomes grey. I intend to sleep at least until the evening. I dream of a dark femme fatale whom I cannot identify, mother and priestess, wicked and tender; she laughs at me and pulls thorny roses from her body; her laughter is guttural and there is a thin, overbred dog at her side which whines, cringes and bares its teeth at me, barking whenever I try to approach her. Panting, I awaken. Dawn is yellow ivory barred with dusty gold. My body aches, my muscles are tense. I have no energy; my skull seems clamped. There are noises from outside. Momentarily I mistake then for the sounds of surf and wind. I hear a distinctive whistling, a boom. I hear voices from the open window. Taking up my dressing gown I walk on stiff legs to the balcony and stand there, supporting myself on the iron railing. The light is painful. There is smoke rising everywhere as if from large fires. I look across the square where figures are running this way and that. Another terrible whistling, and before my eyes I see a Gothic spire crack and fall. My predictions were meaningless, comforting, without foundation; little tunes hummed to keep dark realities at bay, for Holzhammer is bombarding Mirenburg! I turn into the room. Alexandra continues to sleep. She has pushed back the covers. There is a smile on her face. I check the impulse to wake her and stumble back to light a cigarette and lie looking up at the bed curtains, listening to the sounds of destruction. Then I am drawn again to the balcony. For most of the morning I remain there, still incredulous, as the enemy shells smash a Romanesque column or erode the delicate masonry of a modern apartment building. It is probable that I am not yet free of last night's cocaine because I think the bombardment brings a new kind of beauty to the city, for the moment at least, perhaps also a dignity it has not previously possessed. Just as a woman in middle or late years will achieve grace and poise through vicissitude and pain making her more attractive than ever she could have been in the prime of her youth and looks, so Mirenburg seems now. I do not grieve for her. It seems relief must soon come in the form of a truce. It is not possible that, in all humanity, the besiegers could place upon their consciences the responsibility for the annihilation of so much nobility and optimism, those centuries of civilisation. And sure enough, at exactly mid-day, the guns become silent. Prince Badehoff-Krasny will not let his city be destroyed. The autumn light is washed with grey; clouds rise from the ruins like baffled souls. I return to bed and sleep, my own wounds forgotten. Old Papadakis brings more boiled fish. I am surprised because I can smell alcohol on his breath. "You were so proud of all your abstinences," I say. "You sought them out as if they were positive virtues; as if they gave you merit. You were so full of yourself. But you know what it is, too, don't you, to be ruined by a

woman?" He sighs and puts the tray over my knees, below my writing case. "Eat if you want to. Haven't you finished your story yet?" We are both exiles. We have no other bond. "Are you afraid of it?" I ask. "See how much I've written!" His dark eyes stare into a corner of the room. I remember when, relaxed, he used to look like an eager boy. "Self-denial is not the same as self-discipline," I tell him. "You remain an infant. But you have lost your charm. She found out what you were, didn't she? Widow-hunter!" I believe I am making him angry. For the first time he looks me full in the eyes, as an equal. "All those dead painters! Vulture! Bring me a bottle of decent Claret. Or have you drunk it all yourself? Why do you feel you should be rewarded? You have spent your life responding to others and you thought it would always pay. And now you have only me and you cannot bear to respond, can you? I am your nemesis."

"You are mad," he says, and leaves. I continue to laugh. I disdain his pieces of fish. I continue to write. I am writing now. The ink is the colour of the Mediterranean, flowing from my silver Waterman. What have the Italians become? What does their Duce mean to me? And Germany is destroyed. What dreadful perversity led to this? Was it all prefigured? How could we have known better? Oh, the pain of movement. Alexandra is whispering in my ear. "Ricky, I'm hungry." One dream washes into another. I smile at her. "I love you. I am your brother, your father, your husband." She kisses my cheek. "Yes, I'm hungry, Ricky. Do you feel rested? I feel wonderful."

I begin to sit up. "Have you looked outside?" It is nearly dark. "No," she says. "Why should I?" I tell her to go to the balcony and to tell me what she sees. She thinks it is a game. Frowning and smiling she obeys. "What's happened? Oh, God! They have pulled down —"

"They have shot down," I say. "Holzhammer's siege is beginning in earnest." First she is frightened, and then she begins to show delight. "But Ricky, it means I'm completely free. People must have been killed, eh?"

I draw in a deep breath. I have never known any creature so unselfconsciously greedy. "What a wonderful animal you are. Don't you want to try to get to Vienna? Or Paris?"

"And leave Rosenstrasse? Is there anywhere else like it?"

"Nothing quite like it."

"Then we'll see what happens."

That night we visit the brothel and before the new girl, (an unremarkable creature called Claudia) arrives, Frau Schmetterling pays us a call. "Remember my offer," she says. "They are not interested in this corner of town."

On our way home we are stopped by soldiers. I tell them who I am. Alexandra invents a name. The soldiers refuse to laugh at my jokes and insist on escorting us back to the hotel. The next morning I receive a visit from a policeman with orders for me to accompany him to his headquarters. He is perfectly polite. It is an examination to which all foreign nationals must submit. I tell Alexandra to wait for me in our rooms and if I do not return by evening to inform Frau Schmetterling. At Nurnbergplatz, however, I find an apologetic police captain who claims to have met my father and to be an admirer of the new Kaiser. "We have to be cautious of spies and saboteurs. But, of course, you are German." I

ask if it will be possible to have a safe-conduct from the city. He promises to do his best, but is not very helpful. "My superiors," he says. "They cannot risk anyone reporting to the enemy. Have you been told about the curfew?" No private citizens are allowed to be on the streets after nightfall without special permission. This threatens my routine. I hardly know what is happening. While we are talking, more shells begin to land within the city walls and now I am aware that the defenders are firing back. The policeman is despondent. "We are being attacked with our own guns. Holzhammer seized the train from Berlin. Those are Krupp cannon. Even more powerful than the ones you used against Paris. But I should not tell you this, sir. It is hard to become secretive, eh? We are not very experienced at such things in Mirenburg." I return, despondent, to The Liverpool. Alexandra is half-dressed, busy with her pots and brushes. "Oh, thank goodness," she says, without a great deal of interest, "I thought they had arrested you." She returns to her mirror. I find her amusing today, perhaps because I am relieved to be free. "The guns stopped at twelve," she says.

"I thought so. Some ultimatum of Holzhammer's, I believe, though the papers are vague. They are being censored." I put them down on the bed and remove my jacket. The idea that I am trapped in this city makes me uneasy. I hope that my bank will not be affected. I have forgotten to get a new book of cheques. The papers say there is every expectation that the new food-rationing system will preserve supplies of basic commodities for the duration of the War. A well-informed source has assured a correspondent that Germany is bound to send troops soon. There is no reference to Holzhammer's capture of the Krupp cannon. A sortie by Bulgarians has been successfully driven back at the Cesny Gate, to the South. Various regiments are deployed about the first line of defences beyond the walls. All the loyalist soldiers are in good spirits. Morale amongst Holzhammer's 'rag-tag' of mercenaries, misguided peasants and treacherous rebels, is said to be already very low and the world has received the news of the cannonade with horror. Comparisons are made to the Siege of Paris, to Metz and elsewhere, but in all cases those cities were, we are told, far less well-prepared.

Without a word to Alexandra I go downstairs and telephone Frau Schmetterling. She has one of the few private telephones in Mirenburg. "I would like to take you up on your offer," I tell her, "if it is still possible."

"Of course," she says. "The rooms will be prepared at once. When will you arrive?"

"Probably in an hour or two."

She hesitates. Her voice becomes faint as the line fades. "You are bringing your friend?"

"I am afraid that I have no choice."

While Alexandra sees to the packing, I pay the bill

**Michael Moorcock** is the Charles Dickens of our times, an immensely fertile writer whose work ranges from popular thrillers and romances to experimental and poetic novels. Born in 1939, he is already the author of some 70 books. The most recent are *The Entropy Tango* (1981), *The Warhound and the World's Pain* (1981) and *The Brothel in Rosenstrasse* (New English Library, 1982), which incorporates, in substantially different form, the story published here.

with one of the manager's blank cheques. He continues to apologise so much I feel sorry for him and am able to smile cheerfully enough. "Please don't worry. I am sure to be back within a couple of weeks." I cannot inform him of my destination. Alexandra and I are about to disappear. If we are discovered, when the War is over, I shall make her father an offer. I can marry her and save the scandal. For some reason I do not tell Alexandra of this plan as, with boxes and trunks in three cabs, we flee the ruined Liverpool to the sanctuary of Rosenstrasse.

*With thanks to Malcolm Edwards who edited this extract for publication in this form.*

## · IN REVIEW ·

**Roderick, or The Education of a Young Machine** by John Sladek (Granada, £1.95)

Originally published in hardcover in 1980, Sladek's large and funny novel is one of the best paperback buys of the season. Roderick, a wide-eyed little robot, wanders like Candide through a contemporary America which is every bit as zany as the real thing. One's concern for the wee machine grows as he is maltreated by foster-parents, teachers and crooks. The novel is full of the most amazing dialogue, interlarded with mathematical games, riddles, philosophical conundra. The book is also something of a treatise on the whole theme of mechanical men, homunculi, automatons and machine intelligence. It's the ultimate robot novel. A sequel, Roderick at Random, is due out about now. I shall buy it with alacrity. (DP)

**Riddley Walker** by Russell Hoban (Picador, £1.95)

Hoban's novel, extravagantly praised by critics on both sides of the Atlantic, is not quite as unique in conception as some have asserted. The setting is Kent some thousands of years in the future, after a nuclear holocaust has bombed the human race back into a seemingly perpetual repetition of the Dark Ages; the story centres on the rediscovery of gunpowder, with all that implies for the future of technology and warfare. What is extraordinary about *Riddley Walker* is the dialect in which it is narrated and written (this looks forbiddingly difficult on the page, but is actually quite easy to follow, particularly if mentally read aloud), and the way in which fragments of half-remembered history of the time "back way back" are worked into a complex corpus of myth and folklore underpinning the society. This is a great feat of imagination, but the narrative itself does less with the material than one might have hoped, leaving the impression of a novel which is somewhat less than the sum of its admirably accomplished and ambitious parts. (ME)

**Timescape** by Gregory Benford (Sphere Books, £1.95)

This striving, ambitious novel gathered enormous acclaim when it first appeared in 1980. As reviewers correctly pointed out, it is a tale of legitimate hard science (Benford is a professor of physics) and it engages with important themes. In a polluted world at the end of the century scientists endeavour to communicate with the past in order to change the course of history. Much of the narrative is indeed fascinating, although the book is marred by domestic longueurs,

an excess of travelogue material and far too many descriptions of food. A little too much soap has got in there with the tachyons. Nevertheless this is a commendable exercise in near-future realism. Few sf writers would be sufficiently well qualified (or brave enough) to attempt such a work. (DP)

**The Unlimited Dream Company** by J.G. Ballard (Granada, £1.25)

Ballard's 1979 novel, recently out in paperback, is an astonishing fantasy of self-aggrandizement. Blake, a 25-year-old misfit, crashes his plane into the Thames, apparently dies, and is reborn as "a minor deity". He embraces the town of Shepperton, remoulding it according to his desires and filling it with vivid flora and fauna. Eventually he learns a kind of humility and gives himself away, piece by piece, to the townsfolk. This is a remarkably rich and paradoxical novel, full of Ballardian imagery, wonder and menace. It is a wayward work, but one which grows in the memory, becoming more meaningful with each reading. Not the least of its appeals is the undercurrent of dark humour — exemplified by the central notion of a suburban Dionysus, a dying god for the contemporary Home Counties. (DP)

**The White Hotel** by D.M. Thomas (Penguin, £2.50)

Few novels have attracted as much attention by winning literary awards as *The White Hotel* did in failing to carry off the 1981 Booker Prize. For once the fuss is justified: this is a beautifully written novel of quite devastating emotional impact. It tells the life story of a woman who, suffering from an intractable form of hysteria, is referred to Sigmund Freud for psychoanalysis in 1919. Her later career as a minor opera singer leads to marriage to a Russian, and the novel's climax in Nazi-occupied Ukraine in 1941. Thomas is thus able to encompass two central events of our century: Freud's work in psychoanalysis, revealing as never before the endless richness of the human mind, and the mass atrocities of World War II, in which millions of such minds were clinically and brutally expunged. This juxtaposition of the intensely humanizing and the utterly dehumanizing, achieved through a brilliant imaginative device, is so powerful as to make the final pages acutely painful to read. *The White Hotel* is one of the rare novels that one reads with the absolute certainty of being in the presence of a new masterpiece. (ME)

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